

異世界居酒屋

isekai izakaya "NOBU"
presented by Natsuya Semikawa
illustration / Kururi

蟬川夏哉

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Different World Tavern Nobu

– Isekai Izakaya Nobu –

- Volume 1 -

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– SYNOPSIS –

Imagine there is a bar, which serves a variety of food and drinks and makes you feel like you have been transferred to another world! The bar, which is called “Nobu”, is located in a back alley of the Old Capital.

This is a small tale that revolves around this otherworldly bar.



Chapter 1

The Potato in Oden (Part 1)

“Recently, there’s this place that everyone’s been talking about in the Old Capital.”

Just hearing that made Hans’ stomach rumble.
This was after their harsh training.

Hans is employed cheaply as a soldier in the Old Capital, and within his wages is the obligation to undertake training. Thanks to that, it’s not like his figure doesn’t have a firm feel to it, but with his unruly brown hair and large eyes, even though his years have already surpassed twenty-〇, he still looks kind of young.

There was a new commanding officer because of the increase in soldiers, so training was exceedingly strict. Even today, Hans’ corps went out beyond the Old Capital’s walls, marching all the way until they reached Albruke Forest. The just-like-real-combat training has a bad reputation.

But, that aside, right now is dinner time.
Another happy thing is that today is payday, so the weight of Hans’ wallet is a little reliable.

Like that, there’s no need to stick by the familiar bar that puts out cheap-selling, sour ale. Hearing about a shop that has rumors around it caused him to walk faster; there was no reason to hesitate.

Even though the shop was in the Old Capital, it was standing in a place that was hard to reach.

Further more, it was a weird looking shop.

In this Old Capital where each building is made of stone with the eaves all connected to each other, only this one build is made of wood with plaster. The roof is ... slate shingles; it’s probably what’s popular in the Capital. They’re strange an wavy; it has a mysterious atmosphere.

And then, there’s the signboard.

If it were a regular shop, there'd be a bronze-made signboard stuck out on the side of the street, but this shop had a large wooden plank, with foreign letters spelling out something or other.

"Oi Nicolas. That signboard, what's written on it?"

"Aa, it seems like 'Izakaya Nobu' is what's written there."¹

The one who led Hans here was in the same regiment, "Moustache" Nicolas, is somehow knowledgeable.

"Nobu? Is it someone's name?"

"Aa, it looks like it's this place's master's name. Nobu Taisho. It's fine to call him Taisho in the shop."

"Hee..."

Nobu Taisho.

That's clearly not a name from around here. He's probably from one of the clans on the frontier.

"By the way, Nicolas. What kind of stuff do they serve at this shop?"

"Dunno. It changes day-to-day."

"Day-by-day? What do you mean?"

Like they serve meat, or they serve fish. It should be obvious that a shop would have some kind of specialty. There are also shops with delicious alcohol. A shop that has everything and where everything is delicious is inconceivable.

In the first place, in this Old Capital, there aren't many kinds of cooking in itself. At best it's sausage, cheese, soup, and stew. As well as potatoes and pickled cabbage.

"Ma, you'll just have to eat it to get it, Hans."

"If you say that much, Nicolas, I'll just have to trust you. Because we've been have potatoes nonstop day in and day out in the barracks. As long as it's not potatoes, anything's fine."

At that moment Hans noticed something strange.

(... this is, glass?)

The wood sliding door had a lattice pattern, but in between the spaces were glass-like things. Because it was cloudy you normally couldn't tell if it was inferior or not just by looking, but for Hans whose dad and older brother are traveling glass artisans, he could tell with just a glance.

"... Oi, Nicolas. Is this really gonna be ok?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about the bill; even if you say it's because today's payday..."

"Whaaat, you're worrying to much. Here you can even put it on a tab."

While slapping the worrying Hans on the back, Nicolas opened the sliding door and entered the shop.

"Welcome!"

"... 'elcome."

When they entered the shop, two voices called out.

The first, more polite one was a woman. The last, shortened version was a man.

The interior wasn't very big; at the counter there were six seats, and there were only two tables. Everything is organized snugly together, but there is a bright sense of cleanliness. Their luck was good, since inside the shop there was still only one customer.

Nicolas slipped into a seat at the counter like he was used to it and ordered, "Torieazu Nama! Give this guy one too!"

<T/N: *Torieazu nama* - "A draft (beer) to start with">²

"Oi, hang on, what was that, the Toriae ...whatever?"

"Aa, Torieazu Nama you mean. Even if you think I'm messing with you, give it a drink. You'll be surprised."

"Drink? Is it alcohol?"

"Aa, it's ale."

Ale, huh?

If that's the case, then he has no complaints. Above all, Hans loves drinking ale first before a meal.

But, he's fussy in his tastes with this. There've been times when he relented and drank ok ale with his dad and older brother. If a shop puts out awful ale, then even if the food's good, forget about it.

"Ok, two orders of nama, sorry for the wait. Pardon me, but I'll be setting them down from the side, ne."

The woman who appears to be the waiter brought the ales in glass mugs.

This is also glass. And further more these are transparent; they even prepared such high-class items. There's no way this is an average business. You can't tell with ceramic or wood mugs, but here you can clearly see that the ale is a transparent yellow, no, in the case of this Toriaezu Nama it's a golden color. Unlike inferior ale, there's also a fine froth on top. Trying to ascertain what the surface of the mug was made of, Hans stretched his hand out and,

"It's cold!"

As soon as he realized it, he drew his hand back. What a shock, it's cold. What's with this.

"Haha, I was startled at first too. Ma, for now just drink. Prost!"³

"O, ou, prost."

Giving Nicolas, whose throat was making gulping noises, a glance, Hans took a deep breath.

Chilled ale, it's something he hasn't experienced before, but what the heck kind of thing is it?

In the cities around his hometown, other than Koenigsbroi,⁴ none of them would have thought to make this.

Gulp.

Gulp.

Gulp. Gulp. Gulp. Gluglugluglug.

Draining it off in one drink, Hans stared at the mug.

What. Is this.

Whether it's delicious, whether it's not delicious, that's not the issue here. The feeling of it going down your throat, its cleanness, all of it, compared to all the ale he's drunk up until now it's wholly different.

"N, how was it, Hans? Good right?"

"... like, cow urine."

"Ha?" and Nicolas made a confused face.

"I'm saying, all the ale I've drunk up until now is like cow urine!"

"Ufufu, was it that delicious? Would you like another nama next?" to that question the waitress asked, Hans nodded deeply in agreement.

"Aa, Toriaezu Nama, one more!"

"Ok, thank you very much. Add an order of nama!"

Now that he looked, before his eyes Nicolas was picking up the beans that came in bunches placed between the two of them like they were delicious.

"Oi, what's that?"

"This is an appetizer. Beans boiled in salt."⁵

"Beans huh. The husks aren't peeled; are they cutting corners?"

"No, it's not that. There's salt sprinkled on these husks, so if you eat it like this ... it's perfectly seasoned with salt."

"... ho hou."

To try it out, one mouthful.

Using his fingers to push the beans through the skin, along with a *pop* kind of texture it entered his mouth.

Pop, one bite.

Pop, one bite.

Pop, one bite.

Interesting, fun, and delicious.

This is, a dirty trick. For example, if these appetizer beans were already out of their hulls, then you'd use a spoon to scoop them up and eat them; you probably wouldn't have this fascination.

"Nicolas, this is, I can't stop."

"Aa, it's impossible to stop. It's delicious, and with this, it matches well with Toriaezu Nama."

“Unfair, just you drinking!”

“Right, thanks for waiting.”

Like it was answering Hans’ request, another cold Toriaezu Nama was brought out to him.

With the appetizer in his mouth, just like that he drank the Toriaezu Nama, and,

“Delicious!”

“Right?”

Nicolas **bang bang** smacks the somehow delighted Hans’ back.

Splendid. It’s a splendid shop.

He’s not sure which distillery this mysteriously named Toriaezu Nama ale came from, but it’s simply great.

Full of humanly satisfaction, Hans looked around the shop’s interior.

The female waiter was, with nothing else to do, immediately moving to wipe the shop’s table, clear away cups, and moving around taking care of the details.

With black hair tied behind her back and a white triangular cloth wrapped around her head, she was overflowing with a somewhat exotic appeal. She also had the characteristic of having black eyes. Though she had a slender face her figure is somewhat sensual, but it doesn’t have a lewd feeling anywhere you look. In front of them, behind the counter, is “Taisho,” a man reminiscent of a veteran warrior.

With the same black hair and all of his nails recently clipped short to about the same height, the trained eyes that he scanned the ingredients with were like the air of a resident of the battlefields. The clothes are also strange; as expected these are probably people from the frontier.

“By the way, Taisho, what can we get to eat today?”

In response to Nicolas’ question, Taisho lifted his face and responded.

“Today is oden.”

Notes

1. Izakaya – not really a pub, or a tavern, but it's not just a bar either. A casual, usually small, dining area to stay and drink your sake accompanied with delicious food. That's what an izakaya is. For the name, I will be leaving it as "izakaya". For non-formal nouns it will be "tavern". Because, it's kind of close enough to a tavern?
2. toriaezu nama beer – toriaezu (for now), and nama beer is draft beer (beer on tap), often shortened just to nama. But yeah, it's a phrase often used by those drinker-types before they even take a look at the menu, basically meaning, "First start us off with a round of beers!" I left a translation note in text too, since the entire joke is lost if you wait to the end to check the footnotes. Yes, they're assuming that toriaezu nama, in katakana, is the name of the ale. And yes, I giggled every time I translated it.
3. prost – german for cheers.
4. kenihiburoi – I'm starting to get the feeling there's a lot of katakana representing German ... if I translated the German wrong, sorry. I took French in high school. I know the first half is Koenigs, but ... Koenigsburg? Well, I just left it as Koenigsbroi. Because ... I dunno!
5. otoshi – I translated it as appetizer, but an otoshi is a small dish that's automatically served with your drink. If I was translating it more literally, it might be "accompaniment" instead of appetizer. However, unlike American peanuts or whatever they give you at a bar, you are charged for otoshi, though it's not mentioned; it's a culturally understood charge. Just saying, there are often times when you will not be allowed to NOT have the otoshi and drink, so it's best to ask right off the bat. Whether the shop you're in is being enterprising or not, at least the general idea behind it is that they don't want you drinking on an empty stomach. In this case, I'm guessing the otoshi is edamame, boiled soybeans in their pods, even if they don't outright say it.

Chapter 2

The Potato in Oden (Part2)

“Aa, oden, ne.”

“... do you know it, Nicolas?” is the question that, to the knowledgeable look Nicolas had, Hans asked.

“Nope, not at all.”

With that kind of exchange, before their eyes an over-sized soup dish was brought to them.

The garnishes are, large.

Rather than a soup dish, this is probably more along the lines of a stewed dish, is what Hans correctly guessed. The wind blowing outside has become cold, so this time he's grateful for a stewed dish.

If you think about it, that name, Odin(oden), was the name of some god of some Northern tribe,¹ so it might be that it's a traditional dish from a cold region.

“Oden huh. This is egg, this is, potato, huh? Is there no wurst² in it? If you add that into the stew too, it's really good though.” When Hans said this, Taishou grinned widely.

“Sausage, huh. That's certainly delicious. But, today there isn't any. In exchange, this is added in.”

So saying, he put meat stabbed through with a skewer into Hans' dish.

For Hans, aside from the name of the garnish, he can't even guess what the ingredient used is. Without having any good idea of what it is, his impression is that it's a very tender garnish.

The transparent soup's gentle fragrance tickles the nostrils. This is, something he's never smelled before.

“*Sa*, quickly eat it *ze*.”

At Nicolas' urging, his fork wandered around.

Which one. Which one should he eat.

Should he start with the things he knows because he knows them, or should he start with the things he doesn't know because he doesn't know them ...

Hans set his sights on a short, cylindrical-shaped garnish; the fork slowly pierced it.

Without hardly any resistance, the Fork was sucked in. It must have really absorbed the soup. The color of the soup has completely stained it.

Timidly, he held it in his mouth, and, being moved, crumbled it.

Hot. But, delicious.

“O, daikon (white radish), huh? The flavor's really seeped in, hasn't it?” said Taishou.

“*huff*, umu, *huff*, it's delicious.”

And what is Daikon? Who knows. But, it's delicious.

After working up a sweat in training, for a body that has been chilled, this warmth is, how to say it.

Before it reaches the stomach warms it like this, it goes and puts the body's heart at ease.

The black-ish, floppy “Konnyaku”⁵ has a, surprisingly firm quality to it.

The skewer-stabbed “Gyuusuji”⁴ that seems like it would melt has a rich flavour.

The “Chikuwa”⁵ has really soaked in the soup.

And then,

“... potato, huh?”

This is completely an attitude like, no matter what kind of dish there's no way it will taste good.

Whether boiled, backed, steamed, or fried, this is a flavor that Hans' body has already been steeped in.

It's been twenty-〇 years since he had been born. Ever since the day he had stopped sucking from his mother's breast, every single day he'd continue to eat those lumps. Even now, being stewed in this somewhat delicious soup, he can't imagine the taste changing.

“What, are you bad with potatoes?” Taisho peered into the suspicious Hans' dish.

“No, I’ve just gotten so used to eating them it’s painful. It’s like my excitement for the oden is dying.”

“Fuun. Then, here, why don’t you try using it with this?”

So saying, he dabbed a sticky, yellow paste on the rim of Hans’ dish.

Hans knew it by smell. It’s mustard.

“Mustard? You mean, use mustard on the potato?”

“I guess you can call it mustard, karashi⁶. *Ma*, try eating it.”

Hans also knew mustard well.

A little spicy and sour flavouring, it’s used to hide the gamey stink of meat. To use it for potatoes, he hadn’t heard of it before, but it’s not like he can’t guess its taste.

With a dab that could feel like it wasn’t enough, Hans carried the potato dabbed in Karashi to his mouth.

“N, *fuha*? Nn?”

Spicy. A spiciness that irritated up through the nose. This is, this isn’t mustard.

And, the potato.

Hot and fluffy, as well as sweet and tasty ... with the Karashi’s spiciness, it’s a match.

What, is this?

“*Na*, the potato too, it’s good right?”

Returning it with a nod, Hans once again bit into the potato.

Spicy. Delicious. Spicy. Delicious.

Like this, this isn’t a potato. This warm fluffiness, it’s something completely different.

Looking in the direction of Nicolas to share his excitement, Nicolas was *niya niya*, widely grinning while sipping something. It wasn’t a jug. It was a small, earthenware cup, it was.

“Nicolas, that, what is it?”

“Aa, what this is, is Atsukan *dayo*. With oden, it matches well.”

“Atsukan? Taisho, give me one of the same!
“Right-o, one order of atsukan(hot sake) *ne*.”

Happy about something, the edges of his mouth cheerfully loosened while Taisho prepared the hot sake.

The faint alcohol smell isn't like an ale or wine, and isn't like iodine.

“Right, ‘nks for waitin’”

It was brought out with that saying, a pottery container with a long neck, and a very, very small, fired pottery cup.

Hans carefully poured the contents, which were warmed to about body temperature, in order not to spill.

How fragrant.

An incomparable scent floated from the completely clear alcohol; it reminded him of that mythical Nectar.

First, one mouthful.

Kyu-, when he poured it into his mouth, the inside of his head went fuzzy as the intoxication spread.

Strong.

This is, a really hard drink.

No, it's different. Unlike a hard drink, it didn't have that stabbing bite.

Hot, and yet, a transparent, powerful strength. Its taste can be called a quiet strength as it flows through the throat. What is this deliciousness?

Dipping the potato in Karashi, he carried it to his mouth.

And with that, pouring Atsukan in ...

A yet unnamed symphony spread out inside his mouth.

A happiness that can't just be explained with words, there it was.

Before he noticed it, the dish of Oden was consumed, and the additional Atsukan and Toriaezu Nama were drained dry.

There's a pleasant feeling of drunkenness and weightlessness.

Never before had there been such a happy dinner.

“Your bill is one-fourth of a silver.”⁷

Handing over half of a silver to the waitress, Hans had a sudden thought.

Really, with this much drinking and eating, is just one-fourth of a silver ok?

“This, isn’t this a little too cheap?”

When Hans said this, the waitress gave a small smile. She has dimples, how charming.

“With Dear Customer’s face so fully satisfied, there is no need to pay anymore.”

While wandering here and there, in no rush on the way back to the barracks, Hans let out a sigh.

Seeing that, Nicolas grinned widely.

“Why did you just sigh, did something just ‘hit’ you?”

“Shut up. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

Hans’ face turned red; was it just because he was drunk, or else could it be...
Like the potato in oden, a round moon floats in the sky.

Notes

1. oden/odin – oden sounds a little like Odin from Norse mythology ... I think that’s what the author’s getting at.
2. written as sausage (well, actually written as stuffed intestines, but you know), read as “wurst”, German for sausage.
3. konnyaku – konjac, a gelatin-like substance made of a ... tuber-like part of the konjac plant. (It’s not a bulb or tuber, though it’s often called a yam). It’s squishy, but firm enough to break cleanly. It’s kind of flavourless or very lightly flavoured, and liked more for its texture than taste. Because it won’t soften or melt (much) when stewed, it’s often used in stews or soups to have an ingredient with a firmer consistency to chew. That being said, it doesn’t soak up the flavors as thoroughly as other ingredients either. Well, the noodle-like versions (shirataki) do though, especially oil. Hm...
4. gyuuusuji – beef tendon

5. chikuwa – a thin, tube-like garnish. It's made of fish that has been ground into a paste called surimi, seasoned, and then shaped into the tube.
6. karashi – It is a mustard, at least it's a paste made with the seeds of a variety of mustard plant, like mustards. But it is quite spicy.
7. In case it's not clear, she's saying "you owe 1 (coin/currency) that's worth $\frac{1}{4}$ of a silver coin."

Chapter 3

Deep-Fried Chicken (Part 1)

Winter in the Old Capital was cold.

Even though it didn't snow much, the coldness of the north wind pierced the body.

"There's nothing better than drinking alcohol on such a day."

The commander of the sentry corps, Berthold, muttered while disbanding his troops.

Today, the training might have been a little too harsh. They were ordered to leave the castle walls and march to the forest while carrying a load. If it was just that much, it was something they practiced everyday. However, they even had to carry out mock battles twice, no, three times today.

If it were other corps, this would be impossible, but the Berthold corp was well known for its rigorous training anyway.

The distance they had to run was long.

The other commanders laughed at him for not putting emphasis on weapon mastery.

Even so, as a mercenary in origin, it was Berthold's creed to make them run.

A soldier had to run.

Being able to run long distances increased the chances of survival.

"...Besides, ale tastes better after running."

He had heard rumours of a store circulating among the soldiers.

However, Berthold didn't know the place.

"Then, why was I chosen..."

"Think of it as an honour, Hans. An opportunity to drink with the commander does not come very often."

Under the pretext of admonishing Hans for being clumsy during training, Berthold brought Hans out to show him the whereabouts of this shop.

For some reason, people were expected to have company while drinking.

“Deepening friendship with my subordinates. Maa, this idea isn’t that bad after all.”

Led by Hans, they arrived at the street in the outskirts of the Old Capital. This area was famous for merchants who used the inns and stables, which were located side by side. There were many people there in the evenings.

“We have arrived, commander.”

“It’s a free and easy evening tonight, let’s skip the formalities.”

“Then, Berthold-san. Let’s enter quickly.”

After entering the store, Hans yelled “Toriaezu Nama” familiarly and ordered ale for two people.

It was somehow heartwarming to see a waitress with black hair come up to take their orders with a smile.

While quenching his thirst with the delicious golden ale that arrived, Berthold looked around the interior of the shop.

There was something like a menu written on the wall, but the words couldn’t be understood. The beans named “Otoshi” that Hans was eating were also delicious, but he felt a little uncomfortable not being able to order by himself.

(TL: Otoshi = appetizer)

“Taisho, *dried squid!*”

(TL: italicized since residents of this world were speaking Japanese items in kata. I.e, not understanding the language but only the meaning)

Hans began to order freely, without minding Berthold.

While peeking at the master, Taisho’s hand, he saw him grilling something over a fire.

“Taisho, is that...”

“Dried squid tentacle. Is that okay?”

Squid.

The moment Berthold heard this word, a chill ran up his spine.
The old wound on his left arm began to throb.

“Ah, can I get something else?”

“Well then, what would you like?”

“What is available in this shop? I couldn’t read the words on the menu.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I think I will have to rewrite it soon. Please request anything. I can make most things.”

After seeing Taisho make a smiling face, the desire to challenge him welled up in Berthold. It would probably be good. Berthold accepted the challenge, aiming to win.

The ale was certainly delicious.

How about making a dish to suit this ale? It would be quite interesting.

Having said that, it would be worrisome if something plain came out.

Berthold was becoming hungry. He tightened his stomach. He didn’t want to drink the remainder of his ale excessively.

“...Taisho. I like chicken.”

“Chicken, is it?”

“A fitting chicken dish to pair with this “Toriaezu Nama”.”

“I see. I understand.”

Taisho, not looking particularly troubled, started cooking.
However, Berthold knew. It was a ridiculous demand.

There were only six kinds of meat in the Old Capital.
Pork, mutton, rabbit, beef, horse, and chicken.

The pork was the most popular, since it was easily obtainable. The mutton and rabbit meat were also good.

The problem arose with beef, horse, and chicken. They were products as a result of the animals no longer being suitable as livestock. The cows and horses were vehicles, farming tools, and property. They didn’t often appear on the market.

Then there was the chicken.

The meat of hens which no longer laid eggs were lined up in the market. However, the meat was hard.

Whether it was the breast meat or the thigh meat sold in the market, it was tough and unappetizing. How would it be cooked in this shop?

“Well, while you’re waiting, please eat this. On the house.”

The waitress-in-charge said this and presented a bowl of cucumber cut into round slices.

“Cucumber? It’s huge.”

“Since it was pickled well, it’s delicious, you know.”

Although Berthold didn’t understand how it was pickled, he picked it up just as it was.

It was salty.

But delicious.

What was this taste?

This crisp sensation tickling your tongue, paired with this moderate saltiness.

No, it was not just salty. This taste couldn’t be explained properly, but the hands did not stop.

Cucumber, ale, cucumber, ale, cucumber, ale...

“I ended up finishing it. Can I get a second serving?”

“Yes, one plate of pickled cucumber, coming right up!”

This time, he decided not to rush and eat it slowly.

It was terrifying. It was only cucumber. However, why was it that when he ate it at this shop, it became so delicious?

“Hey, Berthold-san, this is a good shop, right?”

“Hm? Yeah it is. But, the important chicken dish is still not ready.”

Taisho soaked bite-sized chicken pieces into a marinate and massaged it in.

Just what kind of dish would come out?

“Oh, no!”

Taisho looked inside an iron box by the counter and muttered as if he remembered something.

“Something missing?”

The waitress asked.

“Ah, I ran out of pickles...this is bad. Shinobu-chan, could you go and buy them?”

“What would you need the pickles for?”

“Well, it’s for the customer’s dish. But, it is for later.”

“Though I don’t understand clearly...is it still sold in the first place? At this time?”

“Scallions are good enough. Even those are delicious. There should be some sold at the 100-yen supermarket nearby.”

Scallions?

100-yen supermarket?

Berthold didn’t understand those words.

What had Taisho meant?

The waitress took off her apron and was going to go out when Hans stopped her.

“It is dangerous for a woman to go out alone at this time. I will accompany you.”

“Ah, it is alright, esteemed guest. Please enjoy the cucumbers while waiting. It is very close, so I will return immediately.”

After gently pushing aside his hand, Shinobu went out from the back door. For a moment, Berthold saw the scenery outside, and somehow, it was very bright.

Chapter 4

Deep-Fried Chicken (Part 2)

The chicken sunk into the oil, making a sizzling sound.

Although it wasn't too loud, when he heard that sound resound in the shop, Berthold unconsciously swallowed his saliva.

Using so much oil to deep-fry food was luxurious indeed. Generally, the frying pan was raised to bring the oil to the edges while frying the food, and it was finished by grilling it.

That was not the case for this shop.

The chicken meat was swimming comfortably in the oil while getting deep-fried.

"But, how will it taste?"

When Berthold muttered that, Taisho smiled with just his eyes, as if saying that he had absolute confidence in this dish.

However, the ingredient was still chicken.

Whether it was breast or thigh meat, the chicken in the markets of the Old Capital was tough. Even if it was deep-fried, how much could the flavour change? That was Berthold's reasoning.

Even then.

Even then, the sizzling sound, the delicious aroma, and even the sound of popping oil stimulated his stomach. Was it not ready yet?

Had his prayers come true? Taisho began to take the chicken out of the oil.

However, he didn't serve it on a plate.

As Berthold thought about what would happen, Taisho put the chicken in the oil again.

"What's wrong? Was it not fried properly?"

"No, customer-san. The recipe called for frying twice. The temperature of the oil was higher earlier, after all."

Karakarakarakara~

Certainly, the sound was different from before.

He wondered about the meaning in doing this. However, the enthusiasm placed into the cooking was transmitted properly.

It was not supposed to simply be eaten.

It was done with the intention of turning it into a delicious dish.

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it. This deep-fried chicken.”

“It’s called chicken karaage, *na*.”

Besides the chicken, there were some fruits added as garnish. Was it a dessert? This kind of attention to detail was nice. Surely it was Taisho’s way of showing consideration for the fact that his customer was eating oily food. Berthold received it favourably.

Now then, proper food.

“Since it’s hot, please be careful.”

“Yes.”

A single, large piece was pierced with a fork.

Meat juices overflowed from inside. Berthold slowly brought it to his mouth.

Crunch~

The moment Berhold took a bite, he admitted defeat.

The exterior was crispy, but the interior was soft.

The thick meat juices poured out without overpowering the flavour of the chicken.

“Yummy!”

Just like that, Berhold brought another piece to his mouth.

Hot.

But delicious!

Even if you burned your tongue a little, it didn’t matter.

There was absolutely no toughness, unlike a discarded hen. It was soft, yet the taste was so strong.

Recalling what he said, Berthold reached for the “Toriazusu Nama”.

Since he had requested Taisho to cook a chicken dish that was fit to be paired well with this ale, this should match well.

He took a bite of the karaage and washed it down with the ale.

They matched perfectly.

This pairing was like the tale of the hero knight and the princess who were attracted to each other. This “karaage” and “Toriazusu Nama” were destined to meet each other.

Besides him, Hans was shrewdly eating something fried, but without coating.

He wanted to eat some of Hans’s food, but he was not childish enough to do it publicly.

However, it looked good.

No wonder the soldiers were talking about it.

As he ate the karaage piece by piece, Berthold was puzzled.

There were only two pieces left. Once those were eaten, this miracle encounter with the karaage would end.

You could say that he felt regret.

He ate the last one and enjoyed its lingering aftereffect thoroughly.

Absolutely delicious.

Berthold had not felt this sense of satisfaction in all his time in the military.

This, this very dish.

He then decided to eat the dessert prepared by Taisho. He reached for the yellow citrus that had been cut into wedges. However, due to Berthold’s experience on the battlefield, his instincts warned him.

What? Why couldn’t he continue?

Incidentally, he tried verifying this with Hans. Right, Hans had eaten half of the karaage, and then squeezed the citrus over the remaining half.

“Hey, Hans.”

“Yes, what is it, commander? I mean, Berthold-san.”

“This fruit...”

“It’s a lemon. Did Berthold-san not use it?”

“Lemon, you say?”

Hans squeezed the lemon in front of the confused Berthold and showed him.

“When you squeeze the lemon over the karaage like this, it will become lighter and easier to eat.”

“What did you say...”

Finally understanding, he looked at his plate.
Naturally, there was no karaage there.

“Hans...”

“Berthold-san, even if you cry from the bottom of your heart, I won’t share. This is mine.”

“But...”

“Berthold-san, didn’t you eat one whole plate as well?”

While Berthold groaned with a ‘Muuu’, Shinobu returned.

“There were scallions.”

“Is that so? That’s good. This way, I can prepare for future dishes.”

After peeking in a little, Taisho weirdly soaked the crispy karaage into something mushy.

With that, the sense of crispiness was lost.

“Taisho, what is that?!”

“Oh, this is Chicken Nanban. It’s Shinobu-chan’s and my portion.”

Chicken Nanban?

Portions?

Even though he didn’t understand what Taisho said, he understood that it wasn’t a dish meant to be served to the customer.

The karaage was dipped into a sweet-and-sour smelling mixture with a slap. A thick white sauce was then poured on top of it.

It was just like magic.

It was applied to the already delicious karaage. With just that, it was like watching an ultimate dish being completed.

By adding something, it seemed to become even more delicious.

“Taisho...is that all?”

“Dear guest, even if you cry from the bottom of your heart, I won’t share. This is mine.”

“Then, Shinobu-san...”

“No way. Chicken Nanban is my favourite dish.”

Shinobu said, then she grabbed the Chicken Nanban with her fingers and bit into it.

The bit of sauce on the edge of her lips added onto her charm.

“Huff huff. Yummy! Chicken Nanban is the best!”

“Right? The scallions also taste good.”

After seeing the well-mannered Shinobu lick the sauce left on her mouth, despite it being bad manners, Berthold silently decided to be a regular at this shop.

Chapter 5

Shinobu-chan's Napolitan Special

Cabbages.

Yes, cabbages.

Gernot was eating cabbages.

Of the members of the city council of the Old Capital, he was the one in charge of the population census. That Gernot was absent-mindedly eating cabbage.

He didn't even like *sauerkraut*.

On first glance, it appeared to be simple, peeled cabbages.

There was only a little bit of salt from seaweed, and a little seasoning oil. That was all the seasoning in it.

And yet, why?

(TL: *Sauerkraut* = *pickled cabbages*)

“Won't you get addicted to it?”

When the waitress asked, Gernot almost nodded without realizing it.

No way.

It wasn't possible to accept such a dish.

“Certainly, this dish has an original taste, *fräulein*. However, serving something like this at a bar in the Old Capital, with its history and tradition, is a little sloppy, don't you think?”

(TL: *Gernot uses fräulein instead of ojou-san.*)

Gernot adjusted his monocle while conveying the meaning of the statement.

With his prominent forehead and sharp nose, with the monocle, Gernot looked like a professor of the Imperial Court University.

However, his work wasn't such a noble profession.

“I see. I think it's okay as long as it's delicious.”

Gernot shrugged when the waitress said that with a smile.

Regardless of if one said delicious or good, making a remark that disregarded formalities reflected onto oneself. As expected, this waitress from a different ethnicity was uneducated, but her looks were good.

“Even so, when will the head chef, Taisho-san, arrive?”

He asked the waitress while quenching his thirst with “Toriaezu Nama”.

There was no point in talking with the waitress.

Gernot had come to “work” at this bar.

“Since there weren’t enough ingredients, he went shopping for them. Please wait a little longer. Shall I make some simple dishes while you wait?”

“It’s okay. This...crispy cabbage? I’ll snack on this a little bit more.”

Gernot’s occupation was a tax collector.

It was a city council job that entailed collecting taxes from every citizen in the capital.

Obviously, just collecting the required amount was unprofitable, so Gernot, the tax collector, found faults with the taxpayer in any way possible and made them pay more.

The surplus money entered the tax collector’s pocket.

Talented tax collectors were able to collect two or three times the requested amount. It was even said that they could build a mansion or a palace with that money.

Gernot’s target for today was this “Izakaya Nobu”.

This recently opened store had gained huge popularity among the soldiers, so the earnings would also be considerably higher.

If he handled it well, he could expect a large amount of income from them.

Paripari.

Paripari.

Paripari.

Even so, his hands did not stop.

Since his hands wouldn’t stop, they continued to reach out for one after another.

Since it was salty, he became thirsty.

Therefore, he drank his “Toriaezu Nama”. It was a vicious cycle.

Gernot was an official. Even though he was not so weak that he would get drunk after one or two glasses of ale, when he unintentionally drank more glasses than he could count with his fingers, his belly naturally swelled up.

“Well, it isn’t a bad idea to switch the flavours in my mouth for a little bit. Is there anything you recommend?”

“We recommend everything. However, the head chef isn’t around now, so there aren’t many that can be made.”

“Is that so?”

When one said that anything was good, there would be hesitation in making a decision.

Wurst?

Or maybe smoked bacon and stir fried potato?

No, but...

As he pondered, he noticed that there was hot water simmering in a pot by the counter.

Had the waitress begun to boil the water while he was considering what to order?
(*TL: Wurst = grilled sausage*)

“Hey, *fräulein*. If I’m not mistaken...is that pasta I see?”

“Yes, it’s pasta. This is my lunch.”

“Then, I’ll have that.”

“Ehh, but this...isn’t serving pasta in a bar strange?”

Somehow, when he looked at the reluctant waitress, Gernot felt like yelling.

“This is a store which serves food, and I am the customer, am I not!”

“Yes. That is so.”

Pasta.

It had been a long time since he ate some, so when he saw it, he wanted to eat it by all means.

Gernot was from the southern part of the empire, and he grew up eating pasta every day.

Since he was successful as a tax collector in the Old Capital, he had not returned to his hometown even once.

Now that he had the opportunity to get a taste of home after a long time, he did not want to miss it.

“That is my order. Serve it to me.”

“Okay then, I don’t mind. But, for the seasoning...have you decided? I can’t make difficult ones, though.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Well then, let’s go with Napolitan.”

(ED: This is apparently a Japanese variation of spaghetti)

(TL: history trivia, the first spaghetti Napolitan in Japan was made using tomato puree, but since ketchup was more commonly available that time, people tend to use it instead of tomato puree. Thus, this happened.)

Chapter 6

Shinobu-chan's Napolitan Special (Part 2)

Red.

It was very red.

The noodles were very red.

“Fräulein, what...is...this?”

He paused at each word while asking. It gave off an intimidating feeling. Certainly, as per Gernot's order, he expected pasta.

“Customer-san. This is spaghetti. Napolitan style.”

The waitress answered confidently, while putting on her best smile. Such courage.

So that he would not be overwhelmed by her smile, Gernot dropped his gaze to his plate.

It was still red, though.

This red...it certainly had been a long time since he ate something as red as a tomato.

Though, it was still red.

Gernot had not seen this kind of long, thin, dyed in red noodle before, even in the southern part of the empire, where he grew up. The color scheme of the dish was warmer and calmer than the Bolognese or Puttanesca style.

The ingredients were simple.

Green pepper, onion, and bacon. The sight of green peppers in the empire, where vegetables were scarce, was much appreciated. Unexpectedly, the bacon wasn't in the usual, thin, poor-looking slices, but were instead sliced thickly like beautiful, rare gems.

“Oh, you noticed? Those thick bacon slices, the boss eats them as snacks with his evening drink.”

Gernot nodded in understanding. If it was something the boss relished while having his evening drink, this kind of thick slice was understandable.

That being said, to serve this kind of luxurious item, would he be able to afford it?

Living in extravagance should be a cause for admonishment. In other words, it could be used as an excuse for an investigation during tax collection.

Sweet?

No, it wasn't just sweet.

The sweetness and acidity of the tomato was skillfully entwined into the noodles. They were boiled perfectly.

To boil them only to the extent that the core faintly remained in the center.

This waitress was surely not an ordinary person.

However, it didn't stop there.

How could he explain? The entire dish had a childish feeling to it.

It wasn't something for a city councilman in charge of the population census like Gernot to eat.

However, he did not stop eating.

The delicious lingering aftertaste that spread in his mouth, how was it possible?

"Oh, customer-san. Do you use cheese and tabasco?"

"Cheese? Tabasco?"

"Yes, I will set them aside here."

As the waitress said that, she put down two containers. A green cylindrical container and a red glass bottle. It seemed that there was grated cheese in the cylindrical container. He sprinkled some grated cheese on one mouthful of the food and tried eating it.

Delicious!

Indeed, the person who thought of this combination was a genius.

At any rate, if this chef existed, it would be good to recommend a position on the city council for them.

Now, the other one.

Certainly, the waitress said it was called "tabasco".

Gernot timidly sprinkled the contents of the bottle over his Spaghetti Napolitan.

Life.

The universe.

Everything was answered.

At that moment, Gernot received a revelation.

Sweet, sour, and spicy tastes harmoniously spread inside his mouth.

Mixed in with them were the bitterness of the green pepper, mellowness of the onions, and the profound flavour of the thick bacon slices.

This was a miracle.

It was Earth's gift, agape!

The holy texts took the form of spaghetti.

Without caring about staining his mouth with tomato sauce, Gernot hungrily ate the Spaghetti Napolitan.

This encounter, this happiness.

(TL: Agape = divine love)

Before he noticed, his plate was already empty.

He was ashamed to have thought it had a childish taste at the beginning.

That's right, tasting this dish made him recall his childhood memories, which he had forgotten. For this very reason, this pasta existed.

This wonderful taste.

This multitude of flavours that combined magnificently like life's splendor taught him the value of the universe.

Even the white of the plate resembled the sky and taught of the ruthless changes in life.

"Customer-san, you were eating with such vigor. Does your stomach hurt?"

"Yes, well, that isn't the case. It was a really delicious spaghetti. Fräulein, thank you."

While saying so, Gernot took his wallet out from his breast pocket and paid with a single large, gold coin.

"Ah, is that a gold coin? I don't have so much small change."

"I don't need the change."

"Eh? No, but..."

"Well then, excuse me."

“Is it okay to not wait for the boss?”

“It’s okay. This store, it’s good, isn’t it.”

Gernot turned around and left quietly.

To be resented by people...he decided to quit such a job. He would donate the income that he had gained up until now...home, returning home might be a good idea.

“He left...”

Shinobu said, returning the paper napkin that she had brought out.

If there was a ketchup stain around his mouth, wouldn’t the surrounding people laugh at him? That was what she thought, but she decided to keep it locked away in the jewel box of her heart.

Chapter 7

A Young Lady's Unreasonable Demand (Part 1)

The first thing Johann Gustav noticed when he entered the store was its warmth. If you mentioned the word “bar” in this town, you would normally imagine a chilly draft blowing on you as you drank. What was with this store? Even though it was small, chairs were provided, a consideration for people who wanted to sit down and enjoy the drinks and dishes. To pay attention to such details...his expectations went up a little.

He first gave up his seat to a monk, and then looked around the interior of the store again.

There were labels on the wall, which appeared to be the menu and was written in foreign characters. It gave a pleasant feeling. He savoured the atmosphere of the store as he wiped his hand with a thick, warm handkerchief called an “Oshibori”, which had been presented by the waitress as if it were a natural thing to do.

The hanging menu showcased the skills of the chef who could cook so many types of dishes, assuming there was someone who could read the language, of course.

Underneath the menu appeared to be symbols that represented the prices of the dishes. It symbolized the chef's honour in continuing to provide the dishes at the same price, even if there were fluctuations in the price of ingredients.

Although Johann Gustav had not eaten in this store yet, he liked the place.

At the same time, he felt a little embarrassed for pushing such an unreasonable demand onto this great chef.

“May I take your order?”

The waitress asked in a friendly manner. It wasn't too rude, nor was it too formal.

“Well...Hildegarde, what would you like to eat?”

Johann Gustav asked his companion, Hildegarde. It was an unpleasant role, if he had to say so himself. The answer was always decided beforehand.

“I want to eat something delicious that is not smelly, bitter, sour, or hard. I don’t want bread, potatoes, porridge or stew either.”

This girl who had the features of a doll, Hildegarde, ordered something unreasonable again. There was a limited variety of food that could be eaten in the Old Capital. Most of them smelled because of the strong-odour seasoning added in order to preserve the food longer. If you did not want bread, potatoes, porridge or stew, it was impossible to eat something delicious in the Old Capital during winter.

He thought that Hildegarde didn’t want to eat what she ordered, and that she just wanted to watch the faces of the chefs falling into despair after hearing such an unreasonable demand. It was truly malicious.

Despite being only 12 years old, Hildegarde was arranged to marry soon. Although he was entertaining her by watching her ruin the reputations of restaurants in the city, he had little hope that anything would be especially different.

Johann Gustav looked at the waitress’s face with an apologetic expression. However, there wasn’t a hint of a troubled expression on her face.

“Something that is delicious, but isn’t smelly, bitter, sour or hard. Also not bread, potatoes, porridge or stew. Please wait a while.”

She confirmed the order with a lively voice and went to inform the chef. He just silently nodded. What in the world would the chef serve?

Despite her appearance, Hildegarde was the daughter and a successor of the Viscount family. It would create a problem if strange things were served. Since she was orphaned at an early age, Johann Gustav, as her uncle, acted as her parent and might have spoilt her a little too much. He cherished his niece like his own daughter.

Therefore, he wished for her to stay strong and healthy.

Instead of worrying about whether her demands would not be met, he was ashamed at his ignorance, for not expecting that it would go so smoothly. Perhaps he would not need to be concerned about the dish that was going to be served.

The waitress skillfully placed an iron box before Johann Gustav and Hildegarde. It wasn’t an ordinary box. It seemed like some sort of small portable furnace. Which blacksmith came up with this device? If possible, he’d like to invite this person to his territory.

“I’ll turn on the fire, so it’s dangerous, okay?”

When the waitress turned the knob on the box, a pale flame ignited with a ‘pop’. This was splendid! A ceramic pot was placed on top of the fire. Indeed, cooking in front of the customer might be a good idea. It was tasteful, considering today was a cold day. No matter how delicious the dish was, it would still get cold when it was carried to the seat. Setting up such a thing was a luxury. In fact, it was rare for a noble to taste something so freshly cooked.

There was a strip of a green, skin-like thing inside the pot. It was probably seaweed. If that was the case, perhaps this was the dish that was not smelly, bitter, sour, or hard, as well as not being bread, potatoes, porridge or stew?

When he looked at Hildegarde, she was watching the boiling hot water with much excitement. That’s right. Since she was raised in a protected environment, Hildegarde must not have seen boiling water up close before. Even the hot water in the bath was drawn into a tub first, to prevent it from burning her. This was the extent of her overprotection.

The waitress slowly slid a white mass into the pot. It was square shaped. He had never seen such a thing before. Was this the dish?

Neither Johann Gustav, nor Hildegarde, nor the waitress, nor the chef spoke a word.

Only the sound of the simmering white mass could be heard in the store.

Chapter 8

A Young Lady's Unreasonable Demand (Part 2)

A thick, light brown paste was poured on top of the white mass, and topped off with something green that was chopped. According to the waitress, it was scallions.

A pleasant aroma rose with the steam, tickling the nose. Even though, at first, Johann Gustav despised the fact that this was a bar on the outskirts of town, he was mesmerised by the originality of this dish. His forgotten sense of hunger revived.

Faster. I want to eat it soon.

Although the store was warm, his fingers and body were numb with excitement.

Looking at Hildegarde, who was next to him, it was even more humorous.

As a Viscount's daughter, she was taught discipline and self control, but her right hand, which was originally placed on her knee, could be seen hesitantly reaching out and pulling back. Her gaze was on the dish and the spoon. From the side, seeing her staring intently while fidgeting restlessly and calming down alternately was somewhat heartwarming.

Usually, she had to pretend to act mature, like a grown up, but this kind of childish gesture was more appropriate for girls her age, after all.

"Here, tofu with bean paste. Please be careful, since it's hot."

"Tofu, is it?"

Without minding the waitress's advice, he picked up the wooden spoon in his hand.

Taking care to not spill the bean paste, he gently brought the trembling white tofu to his mouth.

"Huff huff..."

Hot.

The tofu crumbled easily in his mouth. It mixed with the bean paste, and a thick texture spread out on his tongue.

One more mouthful.

This time, it was cooled down by blowing on it.

Hildegarde also pursed her small, adorable lips and blew frantically.

Scoop.

Blow.

Eat.

Scoop.

Blow.

Eat.

“Huff huff...”

Steam rose from their opened mouths. There was nothing to chew or roll on the tongue. Such a complicated feeling.

However, when such a warm and gentle taste passed down the throat, it warmed the body.

Despite it being winter, they didn’t stop sweating.

Their mouths, throats, and stomachs, everything was warm.

He drank water from an expensive looking glass. He never thought he would appreciate such cold water during winter.

“...Yummy”

While scooping the tofu to her small mouth with utmost effort, Hildegarde muttered.

“It’s not smelly, bitter, sour, or hard, nor is it bread, potatoes, porridge, or stew. So delicious.”

This child hadn’t experienced a parent’s love before.

Considering that, Johann Gustav ordered the people surrounding her to do as much as they could for her. This clever niece had gradually received love from the people surrounding her. If it were traced back to its origin, it could be said that this was all Johann Gustav’s doing.

“Is it delicious, Hildegarde?”

“It’s so-so.”

While saying so, Hildegarde looked at the tofu with serious eyes.

While grasping the spoon in an overhand grip, which was considered bad manners, she brought the spoon to her mouth and started blowing on it.

The way she brought her face closer to the spoon and used her little finger to push her hair aside really resembled her late mother.

“...Yup, it’s really so-so.”

Hildegarde muttered again.

She stared at the empty pot after she finished eating. All the bits and pieces were eaten. The contents were emptied beautifully.

Only the simmering hot water was left, making small, delightful sounds.

“I have one complaint.”

“What is it, Hildegarde?”

“There’s...too little. It’s not enough.”

Surprised, he laughed. Hildegarde, who had a small appetite due to her unbalanced diet, surprisingly liked this tofu that much.

Certainly, it was good. How should he put it, this delicious dish was an ally during the winter season. Even though it was a plain dish, it gave warmth to the cold body.

“Is that so. Can you make this again?”

When he asked the waitress, she smiled pleasantly, but then rejected him gently.

“The boiled tofu is only the first dish. From here onwards, there are many other dishes.”

As she said so, the pot and brazier was put away and a new dish was brought out. Boiled dishes, grilled dishes, fried dishes...they were all foods that they had never seen before.

Hildegarde’s eyes sparkled brilliantly. She put everything into her mouth piece by piece, as her little body shuddered slightly. It must have been very tasty.

While feeling silly for worrying about various things, he put his fork into a large pot of simmering ingredients.

He immersed himself in the taste. This was also delicious.

In two months, Hildegarde was going to be a bride.

Johann Gustav quietly decided that, until then, he would bring her to this store every week.

Chapter 9

Kiss Day (Part 1)

“It has been a long time since I last came to this store.”

Hans unconsciously murmured in front of the glass sliding door.

Izakaya Nobu.

Only a select few people in the Old Capital knew the worth of this eccentric store that was made of plaster and wood.

It was a shop he wanted to frequent every day, but his sentry guard salary wasn't high. Although “Nobu” was an honest store, it was a little too luxurious for Hans and his measly income.

Even though he had the urge to just eat luxuriously without minding his financial status, Hans had to limit himself from visiting the store too often.

He had received his pay today.

He was fired up during his training and carefully paid attention to not get detained by Berthold again in order to come to this store.

Thanks to that, he was able to visit the store before the sun went down.

“Welcome!”

“...’elcome.”

When he opened the sliding door, Shinobu's bright voice and Taisho's deep voice greeted him from inside the store.

Although almost all the seats were filled, fortunately, there was an empty seat at the counter.

“Ara, Hans, it has been a while.”

Shinobu greeted him with a big smile, while he answered with a small wave.

Almost losing hope, halfway thinking that his face won't be remembered, this waitress remembered Hans' face very well. For some reason, he was happy even though it was a small matter.

“Yo, Shinobu-chan.”

“Are you doing well? Come, come, there’s an empty seat at the counter.”

When he reached his seat, an appetizer was presented to him skillfully.

It wasn’t served beforehand. As the guest entered through the sliding door, Taisho served it on the spot.

There seemed to be many customers who came here after their work, as if it were already a usual thing to do. Although there were various customers, he recognised some familiar regulars.

Let’s not have beans today, but chicken and taro stew instead.

The ingredients, stewed in a sweet and spicy broth, were served in small bowls that felt warm.

Even though winter was coming to an end and spring approached, it was still chilly when night came. Serving this while thinking of people wanting to eat something warm, such was this store’s thoughtfulness.

“For the time being, would you like something to drink, Hans?”

“Yes, one “Toriaezu Nama”.”

While ordering a glass of ale, he carried the contents of the bowl to his mouth using “chopsticks”, even though using a knife and fork was more convenient.

Recently, not only Nikolaus knew how to use chopsticks, but Berthold had also mastered it. Because of that, Hans practiced it secretly at home.

Still clumsy, he managed to grab the chicken meat.

“It’s soft...”

Speaking of the chicken, one would imagine the tough meat of a discarded hen in the Old Capital. It didn’t become soft even if it was stewed, unlike this one. Savouring the flavour of the chicken in his mouth, he could feel the soft texture seemingly just come apart.

And then, the potato.

Nearly letting it fall from not being accustomed to handling the chopsticks, he somehow managed to bring it to his mouth.

He was told that the potato was called “taro” and that it had an intriguing texture that was indescribable. That was why he couldn’t get tired of eating this taro, which had a different texture from potatoes.

The taste was properly being permeated, making one want to eat it just a bit longer.

But, the amount was just right.

It wasn’t too much, nor was it too little. His stomach calmed down a little after eating the appetizer, so he could now take his time to think about what to order today. He had a simple plan, order the thing he liked before.

“Here is the ale. Thanks for waiting!”

“Ah, thank you.”

Hans gulped down the contents of the served glass. Yes, this feeling!

The cold, bitter taste spread in his mouth and was quickly washed down his throat.

This is why he visited this store.

While ordering another “Toriaezu Nama”, Hans looked at the menu on the wall. Before, it was written in the language of Taisho’s hometown, but now it was completely rewritten with the words of the Old Capital.

What should I order today?

Although the appetizer was tasty, he wanted to try something else after not coming for a long time. Oden was good, but he was also intrigued by doteyaki.

The number of things on the menu increased day by day and he had not tried any dishes other than the two mentioned.

“Shinobu-chan, what is today’s special?”

“Right, today’s special is it? Special, huh...”

Shinobu’s voice was bright like always. No, it seemed she was happier than usual today, almost to the point where enough happiness bursted out for everyone to see.

“Shinobu-chan, did something good happen?”

When he asked that, Shinobu hid her face with the tray in her hand while giggling, 'Ehehe'.

“Don't you know? Today, well... It's 'Kiss Day'.”

Chapter 10

Kiss Day (Part 2)

Kiss. Hearing Shinobu say that, all the customers in the store turned their heads with a startled expression.

At Izakaya Nobu, the food and drinks were delicious, but there were customers who came just for Shinobu. You could say that most of the bachelors who were regulars at this store came to be served by Shinobu.

Meanwhile, it was natural that the inside of the store would become noisy when an improper word like ‘kiss’ was uttered.

“So, Kiss Day, huh?”

“Yes, Kiss Day! It’s my favourite day, you know!”

When she said that with an expression like she was going to dance, Hans was allured and made an amused smile.

What was this Kiss Day? Was it a celebration where partners exchanged kisses? Come to think of it, this shop was full of peculiarities. Hans thought it might be a strange custom from a land with a different culture.

An unpleasant sweat spread on Hans’s back.

There was a small church beside the guard barracks, and a new deacon was posted there. At a glance, he looked like a stubborn old man and had a hard-to-approach atmosphere.

When such a person came, it was preferable not to get involved in anything related to the church.

“Kisu is actually the name of a fish, Hans-san.”

Taisho appeared, unable to watch any longer. Although his expression couldn’t be read, like usual, his mouth seemed to tremble a bit. He was most likely suppressing a smile.

Taisho continued to talk while covering a white fish with a cloth.

“In our country, Kisu was given the name “Fish of Happiness”. It is a joyous fish, like the name implies. It is delicious if I make sashimi out of it. Frying it as tempura is also good.”

(TL: It's a play of words on キス, which meant 'kiss' and 'Japanese whiting')

The atmosphere relaxed when Taisho spoke up.

While everyone was thankful for not getting involved in a strange foreign culture, they also seemed expectant of today's dishes.

“That is really an auspicious sounding name.”

“Right! It's also very delicious!”

Even though he didn't know the dish that Shinobu was speaking of, he inadvertently felt like trying it. The heavens had really given this young girl the talent to be a poster girl.

“Taisho, one kisu tempura here!”

“Yeah!”

After Hans ordered it, everyone raised their hands to follow him. It seemed everyone was interested in trying out something new.

Without panicking when the orders piled up, Taisho handled 'kisu' skillfully. He coated it with batter and then fried it, such style of cooking wasn't found in the Old Capital.

However, compared to deep-frying, he didn't seem to use a lot of oil. Asking Commander Berthold of his favourite dish in “Nobu”, it would be deep-fried chicken, right?

While swimming in the hot oil, the 'kisu' made a tasty sizzling sound. While wondering whether the sound would change or not, Shinobu brought something strange in front of Hans.

“Shinobu-chan, what is this thing used for?”

It was made of wood, and Shinobu spread something thin on it.

“Eh, this is paper.”

“Paper? Even though I can read a little, I can’t write anything besides my name.”

“Ah, it is not meant for writing.”

“Isn’t paper a thing to write on? I heard it’s more expensive than parchment.”

Compared to parchment made from sheepskin, the paper was light, since it was made out of wood. In addition, Hans heard stories of it being used among people of the church and scholars recently, since it was easy to carry around.

“It’s used to be spread on this container.”

“Shinobu-chan, such a thing...isn’t it wasteful?”

“No problem. You can eat delicious tempura this way.”

As he watched Shinobu lay paper in containers for the other customers, Hans tilted his head. Did this store stock a large amount of it?

“One kisu tempura, complete!”

Taisho’s voice resounded, as if it was sweeping away Hans’s doubts. The oil on the ‘kisu’ was skillfully drained, and Shinobu piled it onto the plate. The coating on the tempura still made a low, appetizing, sizzling sound that was quite appetizing.

“Shinobu-chan, how should I eat this?”

“You can eat it with Tentsuyu sauce, but it is delicious if eaten with salt as well.”

Doing as he was told, Hans sprinkled salt on it.

As he raised the fried ‘kisu’, he had some expectations for its taste. Since it was Shinobu’s favourite food, it might be unexpectedly delicious.

Chomp.

When he took a bite, Hans was surprised by its texture.

The crispy coating wrapping the soft white fish meat inside was fried perfectly. As he tasted an unknown sensation that spread in his mouth, his chopsticks trembled.

Chomp.

He finally understood the purpose of Shinobu laying the paper on the container. For this refined taste, having too much excess oil would not be good. The paper absorbed the oil, maintaining its exquisite condition. It was calculated to this extent.

After that, the “Toriaezu Nama”.

The exquisite flavour and mild greasiness paired perfectly with the ale.

After enjoying the refined taste with salt, he dipped it into the Tentsuyu sauce and brought it to his mouth.

It was tasty this way too.

Although the salt was better at drawing out the delicate flavour of the white fish, the taste of the Tentsuyu sauce also went well with the kisu tempura. Like this, he could eat as many as he liked.

“Taisho, another helping!”

“Wa-wait Hans-san! If you eat so much, my portion will decrease too!”

Shinobu made a face like she was about to cry, but it couldn’t be helped when it was this delicious.

At the same time, other customers were steadily ordering second helpings too.

“One more kisu tempura!”

“Here as well! One large serving!”

“Wait a minute, everyone! What about my share? What will happen to my Kiss Day?”

In the corner, there was a customer with a child, which was unusual. Although it was good when paired with ale, the child seemed to like the dish too.

The amount of kisu Taisho had stocked up was unknown, but Shinobu's portion had probably decreased by a lot.

Chapter 11

The Thief (Part 1)

The moon shone dimly between the clouds.

Even though it was a season for new sprouts to bud, there wasn't any sign of the cold passing.

The weather of the Old Capital was capricious. Even though the temperature was comparatively higher this year, people were still chilled to the bone.

The mornings were considerably better, but in the evenings, it was still wise to dress up warmly. Due to the heavy rain and snow yesterday, the price of firewood had increased, rather than decreased.

Truthfully, during evenings like this, having a drink and a delicious side dish was something to be desired.

Ever since he found the store at the beginning of winter, Nikolaus had already become a "slave" to Izakaya Nobu.

Oden, karaage, sashimi, and boiled tofu. Every delicious dish came with superb ale. On a cold day like this, he wanted to try out something he never ordered before, a dish called "Shio Nabe".

Nikolaus was heading to the store. However, the nature of the walk was unpleasant.

His frown was mostly caused by the old man, dressed in a priest's garb, walking beside him.

"Nikolaus, why are you frowning like that?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm just heading to this store I know of. It's where we go after work to hang out and drink some ale."

Deacon Edwin's mouth and white moustache twitched upon hearing Nikolaus's words.

The old man, who had a smooth bald head and a beard as thick as his moustache, had just been posted in a small church just next to Nikolaus's guard barracks.

He had a skinny body like that of a dead tree, but with an unexplainable amount of energy, and he was known to be a diligent clergyman who moved about vigorously.

“Isn’t it fine to drink? After work is done, of course.”

“Mmn. After work ends.”

Nikolaus leaked a small sigh while answering.

It was impossible to expect to drink with a clergyman.

If Edwin had come after his work ended, he could have quenched his thirst with ale before returning to his post. However, this wasn’t something he could suggest to his companion. He was a clergyman, after all.

If Hans was available, he would have passed the job to him, but that man was off duty on such a day. Lucky bastard.

Without a choice, he had to turn back after coming to the store to obtain information. However, to go to Nobu at this time and then return, it would be dawn by the time he finished his drink.

To begin with, that fellow who caused trouble at night was bad enough.

If there wasn’t a report of a thief breaking into Izakaya Nobu a few minutes ago, Nikolaus would have finished his work by now.

Additionally, because Edwin overheard it and wanted to observe, it became even more troublesome.

The informant was also pointlessly drunk, so the case seemed like it was already settled. Something valuable was stolen and the thief escaped long ago.

Even with the deacon accompanying him, there was nothing that Nikolaus could do.

This old man was walking fast despite his small stature, so Nikolaus had to adjust his speed and was unable to enjoy the spring month properly.

In the meantime, Izakaya Nobu came into view.

Light leaked out of the familiar glass door, and fun laughter could be heard.

“How strange.”

Edwin stopped and stroked his beard.

“How is it strange, deacon-sama? Izakaya Nobu looks the same as usual.”

“Yes, no matter how you look at it, the store is doing business as usual.”

“Isn’t that good then?”

“Normally, can one open their business properly after a thief broke in?”

“If it is Taisho and Shinobu, then probably.” was what Nikolaus wanted to say but he swallowed his words.

Even though those two were eccentric, a thief had indeed broke into their store. Was it possible to run a business as usual?

Somehow, he felt that it was not an ordinary incident. When he looked towards Edwin, it seemed that the old clergy was of the same opinion. Silently, both of them nodded.

They approached the sliding door as quietly as possible and opened it.

Chapter 12

The Thief (Part 2)

“Welcome!”

“...’elcome!”

When he entered, he was greeted the same way as always.

There were no particularly unusual changes in the store, and even the familiar faces of customers eating delicious dishes and exchanging drinks could be seen. It was hard to believe that there had been a burglary incident just a while ago considering this peaceful atmosphere.

Since it was already late and there were few customers, the tables and counters were cleared up neatly.

Sometimes the store was so full of customers that there wouldn’t be any time to wash the dishes, but it looked like today was not such a day.

Nikolaus and Edwin looked at each other.

Did nothing happen? They had the feeling that they might have just gotten pranked by a drunk person.

“There are vacant seats by the counter.”

They sat down by the counter as suggested, and Shinobu served appetizers.

A bowl containing sashimi of a red fish was set down in front of Nikolaus. However, it was slightly different from the ones he had eaten in the store previously.

“Nikolaus-san, your appetizer today is “Katsuo no Tataki”.”



(TL: seared bonito/skipjack tuna)

“Tataki?”

“After lightly grilling the body, it is sliced like sashimi. It’s delicious, you know.”

Since there was no soy sauce served in the saucer, it seemed that there was some sort of a sauce applied on it beforehand.

He ate it in one bite and knew that it was indeed different from sashimi.

“This dish is delicious!”

The soft texture of the meat was maintained and a fragrant flavour spread inside his mouth.

It might have been even easier to eat than sashimi.

Even though he was already accustomed to eating sashimi and it had even become his favourite dish, Nikolaus was initially weak to sashimi, just like any other person.

Normally, when eating raw fish, there was a fishy sensation. However, tataki wasn’t accompanied by that feel at all.

Shinobu served the “Toriaezu Nama” that he ordered beforehand, which was a smart move, since it went together with the dish very well.

Nikolaus took a glance at Edwin, who wasn't served tataki, but something else. It was a small bowl containing something that was sticky and had a smelly odour. He had no idea when Edwin had ordered that. His drink also differed, and it was not "Toriaezu Nama", but sake.

He had the expression of a good-natured old man, so it was hard to believe that he was the same person from before.

After eating half of the tataki, Nikolaus suddenly realized something. What did he come here for? He came to investigate the insolent thief who had broken into Izakaya Nobu.

He turned around to face Edwin, who had thrown his priestly dignity into the air, and spoke in a low voice.

"Deacon-sama."

Guessing Nikolaus's intention from the tone of his voice, Edwin cleanly drained the contents of the sake cup.

"Sorry, it is against God's will to reject His blessings."

He timidly straightened up his priest garb.

Nikolaus waited until the waitress, Shinobu, seemed free before beckoning her over.

Even though it was less crowded now, there were still customers present. He took into consideration that they didn't want the customers to know that a thief had broken in.

"Shinobu-chan, I'd like to ask something."

"Yes, is there anything you would like?"

"Today...did a thief break into the store?"

Nikolaus didn't miss Shinobu's eyes swimming the moment she heard his words. Although she was pretending to be calm, something was wrong after all. Still, looking at the inside of the store, there wasn't anything suspicious.

"So, there is something wrong?"

“Ehh, the thief, how should I put it...ne, Taisho?”

Since the subject was brought up unexpectedly, Taisho choked and coughed by the counter.

Nikolaus saw someone move beside Taisho.

“Who’s there!”

The shadow that was trying to escape froze at his voice and trembled slightly before stopping. When Nikolaus looked over the counter, he saw a red-haired girl, about 12 years old, cowering like a small, frightened animal.

“Oops...it was found out...”

Ignoring Shinobu’s mutters, Nikolaus called out to the girl.

“Are you the thief who broke into the store today?”

The girl nodded repeatedly while still crouching down.

“What’s your name?”

“Eva.”

Looking at the trembling girl, Nikolaus tilted his head. She didn’t seem like the type to be a thief. There were also the special circumstances, where Taisho and Shinobu were covering up for her.

For the time being, let’s do my job.

When he looked at Taisho, he was scratching his head while giving off a “give me a break” feeling.

“Taisho, who is this girl?”

“She is a thief, as Nikolaus-san said. In a sense, stealing means taking things out of this shop without permission, right?”

“If that is true, then according to the law, she has to be arrested, taken to the guard barracks, and then judged by the City Council.”

Taisho was flustered when he saw Nikolaus's angry expression.

"It isn't that big of a case. After all, nothing was stolen."

"Attempted burglary is also a crime, Taisho. What was she trying to steal?"

Taisho shrugged his shoulders a little and pointed to the washbasin area behind the counter.

"The faucet in the store, that's probably what Eva tried to steal."

Taisho demonstrated to Nikolaus by opening and closing the faucet. Each time it was turned, water flowed out and then stopped.

A small voice leaked out from Edwin as he watched.

"By applying pressure on water that has been drawn and stored, it is easy to make it flow and stop. Fascinating invention, Taisho!"

"This girl, Eva, tried to take this faucet back home. She thought that as long as she had this, water would come out continuously."

Nikolaus interrupted Taisho's words.

"If it's water, there is an unlimited amount of water you can draw from the river or a canal, isn't that so?"

"Nikolaus, even if it's possible to draw it, it isn't possible to drink it. Not without boiling it once first."

What Edwin said was correct. The water in the Old Capital was undrinkable. Since there was a strong smell, the commoners, like any other decent human beings, boiled the water before drinking it. Only rich people could afford to dig up wells.

"If so, then you just have to boil it. Are there any stores that sell this faucet? Even if it's stolen..."

"It's not like that. This year especially, the price of firewood is high, isn't it?"

At Edwin's words, Shinobu nodded in agreement.

"Our customers too, they said this year's spring is late and the price of firewood increased because of that."

The price of firewood had certainly risen. That was what Nikolaus felt too. It might settle down when spring arrived and the cold lessened. It was still cold tonight though. It appeared that the spring season was going to take some time to arrive this year.

Additionally, due to Baron Branton forbidding logging activities in the forest in his territory near the Old Capital, the price had risen exceptionally high this year.

"Nevertheless..."

The girl, Eva, looked upwards at Nikolaus with big teary eyes.
Like an abandoned cat or something of the sort.

"So, Taisho, what do you want to do? Even if this store is overlooked, the next time she needs to buy firewood, she might steal from other stores too."

"It's fine, you know!"

Shinobu replied instead of Taisho, while taking a plate out of the dishwashing area.

"Eva-chan is going to wash the dishes at this store!"

"Washing the dishes, you say? Is 'Nobu' going to hire this child?"

"That is right, Nikolaus-san. Recently, the number of customers has also increased, so it has become difficult for me, as a waitress, to serve food and wash dishes alone, don't you think?"

Now that she mentioned it, the interior of the store was cleaner today.
By leaving the dish washing to Eva, it was possible for Shinobu to move around more freely.

It might be a good idea. Since the store didn't want to aggravate the matter, the girl could also earn the money to buy firewood. Incidentally, since he was able to drink liquor in a clean store, nothing else needed to be said.

Nikolaus scratched his head and let out a big sigh.

"If Taisho and Shinobu-chan say it's fine, then I guess it's fine. Anyway, the City Council probably wouldn't spare time to judge this little girl either."

"We did it!"

Shinobu jumped a little, and Eva began to smile back.

Taisho loosened his expression and began preparing the next dish.

"Well then, Deacon-sama."

"What's the matter, Nikolaus?"

"This has been on my mind for a while now, but why did you come to the crime scene today?"

Edwin's hand, which was holding the sake cup, stopped.

"Why, you ask? I just wanted to see how a guard works, so I decided to follow."

"Speaking of spring, didn't the Church only allow plain food to be eaten until spring arrives?"

"Now, now, let's not sweat the small stuff."

After coming here, Nikolaus's impression of Edwin had been completely dispelled.

"Have you ever come to this store before?"

"Now, now, what are you talking about."

"If you didn't, you wouldn't know about this store's sake and other things like that, don't you think so?"

Whether it was ale, wine, or Izakaya Nobu's sake, it was well known among regular drinkers that once you had taken a liking to a certain drink, you wouldn't stop having it. Still, Nikolaus had not yet seen such a person step out of the store before.

Nikolaus heard a giggling sound, and when he turned around, he saw Shinobu-chan closing her mouth, trying to suppress her laughter.

"What happened, Shinobu-chan?"

"That's because, Nikolaus-san, Deacon Edwin is a regular here. He visits relatively early, so I don't think any of the guards have seen him here before. Even with appetizers, the Deacon always decides on "Shuto" and sake."

"Shuto?"

"It's the pickles of the entrails of the bonito that you, Nikolaus-san, were eating just now. In a sense, sake was developed to be drunk together with it."

"Heh, isn't it serious if a clergyman sneaks out to drink sake?"

This clergyman had an unexpected side to him too.

So, he made up the reason of wanting to watch a guard's work, and it was all for the purpose of coming to drink sake?

"Deacon, please explain this properly on the way back."

"Understood, understood. By the way, what do you intend to write in your report? Certainly, there was a report of a thief and the response was dispatched for the time being..."

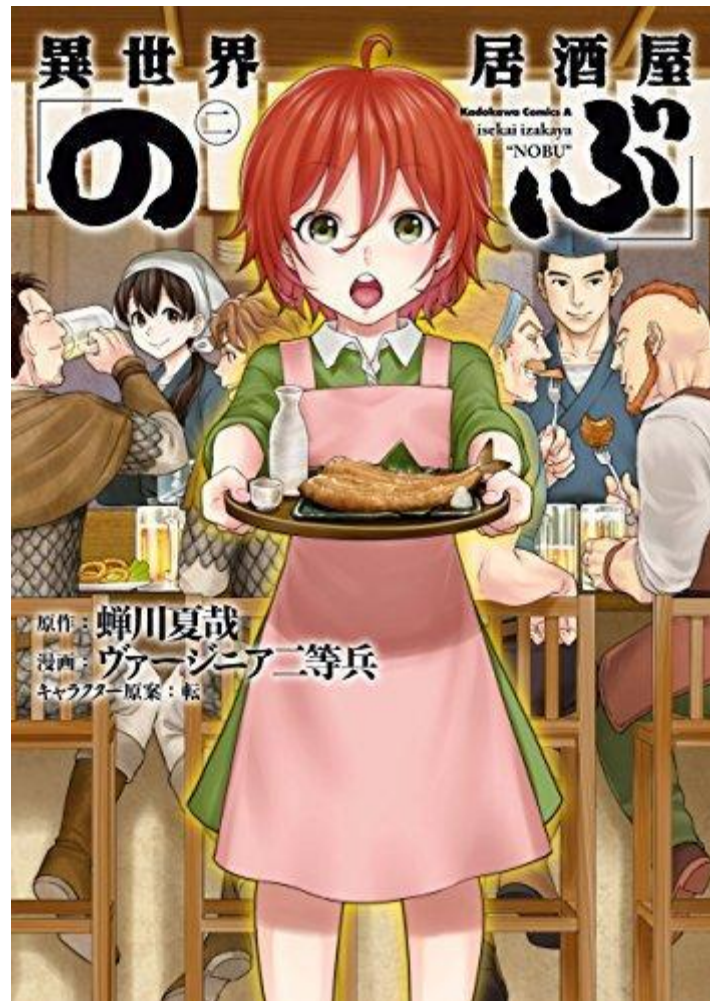
"It's not like there's a thief here, right?"

Saying so, Nikolaus picked up the bowl of pickled shuto.

"It's a felony to sneak away to drink sake. This guard shall take responsibility and arrest this small bowl."

"Ah, but there's still some left..."

At the dejected appearance of the Deacon, Taisho and Shinobu burst out with laughter, while Eva just stared at them blankly.



~Eva-chan~

Chapter 13

An Uninvited Guest (Part 1)

Generally speaking, there were many bridges in the Old Capital.

Since the town depended on the canals for transportation, people used bridges to travel everywhere. They varied from splendid stone bridges to cheap bridges built from fallen trees.

Shinobu enjoyed crossing these various bridges and strolling around the Old Capital.

When she returned from her daily stroll, there was a man she didn't recognize standing in front of the sliding door of the Izakaya Nobu. She didn't mean to brag, but Shinobu wasn't so rude as to forget any customers, even if they came only once. The man standing in front of the store was surely someone who had come for the first time.

"Excuse me, I'm afraid the store only opens in the evening."

When he heard a voice from behind his back, the man turned around and snorted.

He was shorter than Shinobu and had a moustache that didn't suit his slim face, yet he tried his best to look dignified.

"I understand that. After all, I don't have any intentions of entering this poor-looking store that surely serves stinky ale, since it's located in the outskirts of town."

Due to his abusive words towards the store, Shinobu's veins popped out, but she suppressed it with her splendid self-control.

"Then, how may I help you? Unfortunately the owner of the store is away right now."

"The owner is not here...well, that's fine. Miss, this store will be reserved tonight. Make the proper preparations."

"Eh, customer-sama, even if you tell me that, to reserve it so suddenly...."

It wasn't impossible to make a reservation, but for it to be today was too sudden. After all, this place was opened by the owner, Nobuyuki, to provide delicious dishes and drinks to various people. Thus, making a reservation somehow felt like going against the store's original intention.

"Money, isn't it? What a shrewd miss. How much do you want?"

"No, it's not an issue with money."

"You charge other things in place of money? For a lowly store such as this, how impertinent."

"That is not the case. Our store wants all of the customers in town to enjoy the food. We can't accept such a sudden reservation."

After hearing Shinobu's reply, his cheek distorted and he spat on the ground.

"Such big words coming from this girl's mouth. I am the messenger of a certain noble. Since my Lord wanted to eat at this store for some reason, I personally came all the way here. Although you speak well, it is a waste on a merchant like you, who probably has a small brain."

"I am very sorry, this town girl is impudent and knows little. Please humbly accept my apology for my rudeness."

The man flinched a little when he saw Shinobu put on an excellent smile, even after receiving such an insult. However, he believed that Shinobu had given in. He cleared his throat with a small cough and confirmed it once more.

"It's fine if you understand. Tonight's reservation is decided then."

However, Shinobu didn't back down here.

"We decline."

"What?!"

The man's eyebrows raised in anger.

“I said, we decline.”

“Did you not understand what I told you just now?”

“We decline after having understood it. Even if the other party is a noble, we do not serve food or drinks to someone who looks down on our store. There must be other stores that are more suitable for such a person. Please leave.”

“Don’t take your words back, bitch! I’ll convey this insult to my Lord. Don’t come crying to me when something happens later.”

The man hurriedly walked past the dishwasher, Eva, who had just arrived, after leaving a parting threat.

As Eva stared at the man’s back curiously, Shinobu said “Eva-chan, salt! Bring me salt!”, while raising her voice unintentionally.

(TL: Japanese people believe throwing salt in front of one’s house/store wards evil spirits/bad luck away)

Since it was getting close to Izakaya Nobu’s opening time, around when the sun was setting, some people saw the distinct appearance of the man who left that parting remark.

In front of the store, where a queue normally didn’t appear, people began to gather out of thin air. With one look at the man, the people could tell that he wasn’t good company.

The onlookers gathered, impeding the customers from entering, which in turn attracted people who came out of curiosity.

“I’m sorry, Owner! I unintentionally replied to an insult with another insult...”

“It’s okay, Shinobu-chan. Even I do not want such a customer eating my food. You spoke well.”

That being said, Taisho Nobuyuki’s gaze landed on the ingredients he stocked up for today. If the man didn’t leave, there would be lots of wasted ingredients.

This was especially true after yesterday’s spring equinox festival, since he had made too many boiled eggs (yude tamago), and he wanted to use all of them today.

(TL: The closest I could find where boiled eggs were used in a festival is Benten Yudetamago, where they are offered to Benten, God of Snakes and Serpents, in its shrine on 31st Dec.)

Eva seemed to like eating them together with mayonnaise, so in a way she contributed to reducing the amount. The figure of her holding the egg in both hands, so that she wouldn't drop it, while nibbling on it like a hamster was charming.

While Shinobu and Nobuyuki were busy wracking their brains over how to use the boiled eggs, they suddenly heard tapping on the glass sliding door. It wasn't what normal customers would do. Instead, it was a pompous way of knocking.

Sure enough, the doors opened and the small man was there.

Behind him was a gloomy-looking, slim, middle-aged man, most likely the "certain noble".

"I came as promised, miss."

"...Thank you for your patronage."

Shinobu was forced to put a smile on her face, but it was nothing more than a bluff.

To think that he would go this far. Utter defeat.

The noble took a seat at a table in the back, sitting arrogantly, with his legs outstretched. He clearly looked like a crafty man, and he used his fingers to twiddle his moustache.

"Now then, the reason why I came out to this store is..."

The man's voice was unusually high-pitched and stickily intertwined with itself; it was bad for the ears.

"I was invited to a certain noble's wedding reception and attended it the other day. As it was a wedding for a person of a noble lineage, the food was truly splendid, but there were stories about food more delicious than what I ate there."

This seemed to be a favourite topic among the nobles. Anyway, there were probably no dishes that used high grade ingredients in this store. However, how was the story linked to him coming to this store?

“Up until now, as the head of the prestigious Baron Branton family, I have eaten various dishes. Let’s look at it this way, I was born in the capital. I take pride in having eaten all of the delicious delicacies of the Three Kingdoms. Yet...”

“Yet?”

“Yet, I had not eaten the dish that the young bride mentioned. Of course, it wasn’t just me. None of the nobles in the place had eaten it.”

“What does that have to do with this store?”

The baron suddenly rose up from his chair in a theatrical manner.

“Yudofu!”

He pointed to the wall where boiled tofu was written in Kanji, as well as in the words of the Old Capital.

“The dish that the beautiful bride mentioned was “Yudofu”. It is said to be be delicious, yet it is not smelly, spicy, sour, bitter or hard, and it is not bread, potatoes, porridge or stew. With only that clue, my excellent subordinate finally found the store that offered this dish.”

(TL: In case you have not guessed till now, the young bride was Hildegarde.)

“I see.”

“That is why you, waitress! Quickly serve me boiled tofu.”

Even though Shinobu was fed up with his pretentious way of speaking, a customer was still a customer. Just like she would for any other customer, she politely bowed.

“I’m truly sorry. The boiled tofu is only available during winter.”

Chapter 14

An Uninvited Guest (Part 2)

“What did you say? What do you mean by ‘You can’t make it’?”

Shinobu politely apologized to the stunned Baron.

“I’m very sorry, customer-sama. Though it is possible to make it, boiled tofu is a warm food. It is a dish meant to be eaten when the surroundings are cold, so I am unable to serve it to customer-sama in its most delicious state.”

“Ugh...”

Even though Shinobu did not have the intention to talk him down, she had unconsciously put strength into her speech. Since he brazenly interfered with business, revenge like that could be good.

With a sidelong glance, she saw Nobuyuki humming while looking at his stockpiled ingredients. Eva, still unable to understand the situation, was absentmindedly standing with her mouth opened.

“Understood. Let’s do it this way.”

The baron clapped his large hands and sat down on the chair with a thud.

“I’ll give up on ‘yudofu’. Forcing myself to eat food that is out of season would be a disgrace to my name as a gourmand. Having said that, I’ve become a little too hungry to return home as it is, so I’ll order something else.”

“Thank you very much.”

Shinobu lowered her head deeply, while the little man from before glared at her viciously.

Shinobu secretly stuck her tongue out at him.

“Schnitzel.”

“Schnitzel, you say?”

Shinobu did not know the dish the Baron had named. Although it sounded familiar, it didn't come to her mind, at least, not at that moment. She looked at Nobuyuki, who specialized in Japanese cuisine, but he shook his head slightly.

"I want to eat schnitzel. Something that does not exist on the menu. Will you do as per this one's selfish request?"

When he said so, they had no choice but to comply. Shinobu looked at Eva for a glimmer of hope, but she ended up shaking her head furiously.

"Got it, let's make it."

The one who answered was Nobuyuki.

"However, since this dish is not usually offered in our store, I will need some time to prepare it."

"Very well."

Shinobu disregarded the baron, who had generously agreed, and ran up to Nobuyuki at the counter.

"Is it okay, Taisho?"

"I'm going to the barracks now to ask the guards what kind of dish schnitzel is. There are a lot of regular customers there too, so someone should know."

"I see. I will watch over the store while you do so."

"Ask Eva-chan to help out."

"Please come back soon."

"If I'm late, it's okay to make yourself a meal that is to your liking."

"Use the boiled egg if possible, right? Got it."

Nobuyuki left through the crowded entrance after grabbing his coat and putting it on.

“Did the chef specially go out to hunt a pig in order to cook schnitzel?”

“No, it seems that he ran out of ingredients. The market is still open right now, so I think he will return soon.”

Shinobu answered while stroking Eva, who appeared to be anxious. The Baron spread his hands in an exaggerated manner, feeling amazed. Afterwards, as if he had lost interest in the matter, he started a round of cards, gambling with the small man on the table. Shinobu didn't really understand this noble's way of thinking.

Now that she was feeling bored, she began to think about what to make for her meal. It was not a problem for Eva, who was not accustomed to eating Nobu's dishes, since it was a dish that used boiled eggs.

Since Nobuyuki had given his consent to use as many ingredients as she liked, there was no limitation. Even so, she didn't bother to make an elaborate dish in this situation.

“That's it! Let's make that, without having to cut corners.”

“Shinobu-san, what is 'that'?”

“Hmmm, it's more fun to make it yourself. Eva-chan, help me.”

“Okay!”

The boiled eggs were minced into fine slices, then mixed with mayonnaise. Eva sliced the lettuce and tomatoes after they dried, arranged them on a slice of bread, and spread mustard and mayonnaise over it.

It was an easy sandwich to make, but because you would get tired of eating only an egg sandwich, lettuce and tomatoes were added in.

Eva's workmanship was better than expected, and they finished making sandwiches for more than two people in no time.

“Miss, what did you just make?”

The Baron stretched his neck over the counter while holding cards in one hand, feeling curious.

“It’s our meal.”

“How could such a great store leave its customers hungry while the employees make a meal for themselves? Make some for us as well.”

“But it’s something the employees eat. Is that alright with you?”

“Don’t mind me being a Baron. Bring it here quickly.”

Since it was fun to make and they had made too much for two people to finish, it was not troublesome to share some with the Baron.

Shinobu sliced the sandwiches into bite-sized pieces and served it on the card table.

“What is this? To put ingredients in between slices of bread?”

“Yes. It’s called a sandwich.”

“I have not heard of such a thing. By the way, there is no cutting knife and fork.”

“There is no need for them. A sandwich is something you eat with your hands.”

“Using your hands? To eat such a thing?”

“That’s right. I think this dish is suitable for the Baron in this situation.”

Having said that, Shinobu grabbed several cards from the discard pile in one hand, while the other hand picked up a sandwich from the plate.

“By doing this, you can enjoy the sandwich while playing cards at the same time.”

Even though it was bad manners, Shinobu took a bite of the sandwich in front of the baron.

The umami flavour from the eggs spread in her mouth, mixing with the subtle spicy pepper taste from the mustard mayonnaise that Eva had spread in the sandwich.

“I see! What a thoughtful person.”

The Baron reached for the sandwich while he returned to the game.

Chomp~ The baron stopped moving.

Although the sandwich wouldn't run away, the Baron stuffed the remaining sandwich into his mouth and immediately reached for the next piece.

Shinobu poured some milk for both of them and placed it beside them as they enjoyed the sandwich, along with their game.

The pile of sandwiches was considerably large, but before they knew it, it was reduced to nothing.

The Baron, who wanted another sandwich while playing cards, only grabbed air when he reached for it.

“Miss, is there any more of this sandwich?”

“There is still some, but that is our portion.”

“Then, how about making them again?”

“I can make them again if you ask, but what about the schnitzel?”

“Eating schnitzel is another matter. Come to think of it, can you put other ingredients besides egg in this sandwich?”

“Although there are some ingredients that don't fit, it is possible.”

“Then, make something that is heavy and filling for the stomach. I'll leave the contents to you. Make it fast, if possible.”

“Understood.”

Shinobu thought of what sandwich to make next for the Baron, who was already captivated by the sandwiches.

Though there were many of ingredients, the choices were limited if it needed to be heavy and filling for the stomach.

“It can't be helped, right, Eva-chan? It's the customer's order.”

“Yes...?”

After getting consent from Eva-chan, who did not understand the situation, Shinobu took out a thick piece of pork fillet out of the refrigerator.

Nobuyuki had bought quality ingredients because he planned to make fried pork fillet as his meal later. If it was deep-fried, there was no reason it wouldn't become delicious.

(TL: Fried pork fillet = hirekatsu)

When the pan used to fry the cutlet became hot, a fragrant smell drifted through the store. The Baron seemed restless as well, as he looked over the counter from time to time while playing his cards carelessly.

“O...oi, miss. What is that you're making?”

“I'm making the filling for the sandwich.”

“Is that really an ingredient for the sandwich?”

“Yes. It's very delicious, you know.”

There was a method of sandwiching finely shredded cabbage together with the pork, but that was an incorrect method if you asked Shinobu. Since the fried pork fillet had a strong flavor by itself, it was possible to serve it on its own.

The pork fillet, which was coated in thick bread crumbs, had finished frying a little while ago. Plenty of tonkatsu sauce was subsequently poured over it. Shinobu's special pork cutlet sandwich was complete!

As she cut the cutlet, knife in hand, it gave off a nice, crispy response.

“It's done! Please help yourself!”



The baron put the cards down on the table. He held the pork cutlet sandwich firmly in his hands as he slowly brought it to his mouth.

“Delicious! This sandwich is really delicious!”

“Thank you very much. I’m honoured.”

After he had finished eating and enjoying its taste, the Baron took out a leather bag from his breast pocket.

“This is for today’s meal. Take it.”

“Ehh, what about the schnitzel?”

The Baron gave an amused smile as he looked at Shinobu’s surprised expression.

“I’m sure you understand, ojou-san.”

“Yes? No? Wha-...”

“It’s okay. I had a meal here and was satisfied. There should be no problem with this payment.”

“Yes. Thank you very much!”

Shinobu received the small leather bag, but it was considerably heavy.

“By the way, ojou-san, is that sandwich a recipe that you thought of yourself? I have never heard of it before.”

“No, it’s something that people from the past thought of.”

“Is that so? Does ojou-san not have the intention of spreading this dish here, claiming it as your own cooking?”

“I have no such intention. Certainly, this dish might not be well-known here, but it would be rude to steal the idea from the people who originally created it.”

“I see. Thank you, it was a good meal.”

Having said that, the Baron went back.

As Shinobu was seeing him off like a regular customer, Nobuyuki and Edwin came running from the direction of the barracks.

“Shinobu-chan, what happened to the Baron? I finally learned how to make schnitzel from Edwin-san, after a lot of effort.”

“He ate a sandwich and left.”

“Sandwich? Your meals?”

Shinobu then asked Nobuyuki, who was tilting his head.

“So, what kind of dish is schnitzel?”

“Ah, schnitzel is the so-called pork cutlet (tonkatsu).”

(TL: clarification, tonkatsu: fried pork cutlets. There are 2 types of tonkatsu: fillet/tenderloin katsu (hire katsu) and pork loin katsu (rosu katsu))

Shinobu confirmed the contents of the leather bag given by the Baron. The coins within gleamed gold, not silver.

Chapter 15

The Clash Of Masters (Part 1)

“Delicious...”

At the counter of Izakaya Nobu, an elderly man had been continuously staring at the sashimi for a while now.

Simply said, it was an unusual scene. He brought his face close to the sashimi, which was served on a plate, and stared at it as if he was observing it.

“It’s a really beautiful cut...”

The man was gazing at the slice of tuna sashimi so enthusiastically, that he didn’t even notice Eva looking at him curiously from the opposite side of the counter.

This muscular figure, whose bulky muscles forcibly stretched his clothes, was the blacksmith, Holger. He was the master blacksmith of the Blacksmith’s Guild in the Old Capital. Ever since he had entered this store, he had been singing praises for the various things he saw.

“Dishwasher, do you understand the beauty of this cut?”

Eva shook her head in response to suddenly being questioned.

Eva had never seen how raw fish was sliced before coming to this store, so she didn’t have anything to compare it to, and couldn’t say whether the cut was beautiful or not.

“Is that so? You don’t understand it...even though it’s wonderful.”

“Is it really that beautiful?”

“It’s beauty can not be expressed through words. Of course, Taisho’s skills are good, but in the end, it’s still a kitchen knife. That knife is splendid! I have been a blacksmith for a long time now, but I have never seen a kitchen knife that can create such a beautiful cut.”

When Eva looked up at Taisho, who was preparing a broiled fish, she saw that his expression was different from his usual tight one. His cheeks had slightly loosened. Being praised for his tools seemed to make him happy. His hands, which did the cooking, seemed happy as well.

“Ah, Taisho. I ask once again, won’t you show me the kitchen knife? Please.”

Taisho chuckled slightly while wearing an expression that said “This is troubling”, at the sight of Holger lowering his head.

“I understand, but just for a little bit.”

Taisho handed over the kitchen knife, handle first, that he had used to cut the sashimi slices to Holger, who took it and brought it closer to his face, like he had when he was eating the sashimi previously.

From a distance, the surrounding customers smiled in amusement at his excessive enthusiasm.

“I already understand the forging process, but this is not an ordinary method of hammering. This is the first time I’ve seen such steel...”

After seeing Holger muttering while scrutinizing the knife, Eva gradually started to look at him in a strange light. Based on the way it looked now, she had a premonition that he would not return the knife.

Eva panicked and rushed out of the counter. She pulled on Holger’s sleeve and whispered quietly into his ear.

“If that is gone, Taisho cannot make any more sashimi, so please don’t take it home.”

Holger felt bad after seeing Eva cling to him with that expression and returned the kitchen knife to Taisho. He seemed to have gotten slightly embarrassed when he became aware that he was taking it a bit too far.

“Thank you young lady, but even if you didn’t worry, I wouldn’t take it home. It’s a kitchen knife. It is like the soul of a chef.”

After saying so, he stroked Eva’s red hair, disheveling it. Even though it was a large, strong hand, it strangely didn’t feel all that unpleasant.

“Well, Taisho. You have shown me something good. Thank you.”

“I am honoured to have been able to help.”

“It’s not about being helpful. There are a lot of things I want to test out starting tomorrow, so I appreciate it.”

Holger nodded contentedly, picked up the tuna sashimi with his fingers, dipped it into the soy sauce and wasabi, and tossed it into his mouth.

When a customer couldn’t use chopsticks to eat sashimi, they normally used a fork instead, but there were some customers who ate with their hands as well.

After chewing two or three times, he swallowed it without batting an eyelid, and then washed it down with beer.

“Delicious! This sashimi is really delicious, na.”

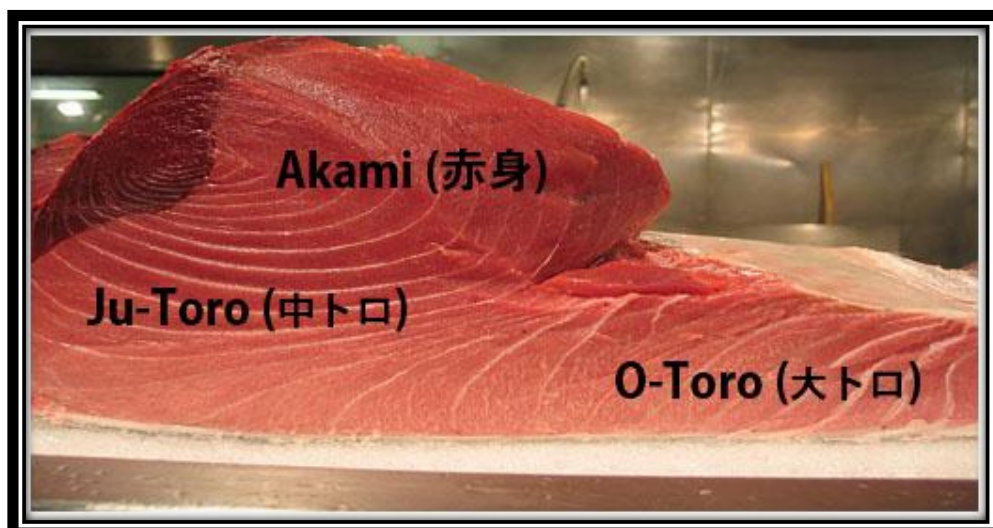
“Thank you very much.”

Taisho bowed.

While enjoying the “akami” part of the fine tuna as an appetizer, Holger drank from a “kiriko”, a specially cut glass. Even Eva was not allowed to wash this beautiful glass, in case it broke.

(TL: Akami is the common red meat cut of tuna you normally eat in sushi restaurants. There’s also otoro and chutoro, the best parts of the tuna of which you might have heard of in high end sushi restaurants.)

(TL: Kiriko is a traditionally cut glass art with jewel like patterns.)



Recently, restaurants that tried to mimic the style of Izakaya Nobu had begun to appear in the Old Capital. Even though Eva thought that it couldn't be reproduced that easily, there were still many people who didn't learn from experiences of others and kept trying.

While she was washing the plates, there were times when she saw someone who seemed to be an assistant from a different store come in to do some reconnaissance of the store. Even when Eva whispered quietly into Taisho's and Shinobu's ears, the two of them didn't respond, instead just showing faint smiles.

Even after doing that, the other stores had no chances of ever imitating the sashimi.

Although there were a lot of rivers and canals in the Old Capital, the fish living in them had an earthy smell. You couldn't boil or roast such pungent fish, and if they were eaten raw, the customers, who were captivated by the deliciousness of the sashimi, couldn't help but return to Nobu.

"There's a tax collector named Gernot. That guy loves his work, even though it's an unpleasant job. Only his tongue was skillful, hmph."

Holger had a seat in the city council, as a representative of the Blacksmith's Guild.

Since Gernot was also a member of the City Council, there was often an opportunity to talk to him, and Holger got interested in the store that came up in his stories.

"Because Gernot's fat tongue was raving all about it, I thought I should come once, to see how it turned out. Do you remember him, Taisho?"

"No, I don't remember cooking for such a person."

Eva, who was quietly washing the dishes, looked over at Shinobu, who was hiding in the corner of the shop while covering her face with the tray. Was something wrong?

"Anyway, I like the food here quite a bit. Taisho and Shinobu-chan, even dishwasher-chan, I really liked the food you guys made. I also liked the kitchen knife a lot. I'll gladly be a regular customer from now on."

A customer came into the store just as Taisho was thanking Holger.

“Welcome!”

“...’elcome.”

The customer waved his hands in response to their usual greetings. It was a man of a larger build than Holger and, once again, he was wearing craftsman’s clothes that seemed to be stretched too tightly.

“Excuse me, is it okay if there is only one person?”

“In that case, the seat by the counter is empty.”

Shinobu guided the craftsman, who came as a customer and was in a very good mood.

“So, you’re Shinobu-chan from the rumours. Ehm, I mean, I heard it from my son. My son, who’s a guard, seems to be a regular of this shop, na...”

The moment the customer sat next to Holger, Eva felt a disturbance in the atmosphere hanging over the counter.

“If it isn’t the Lorentz...”

“What is the Holger doing drinking alcohol here?”

Where had the peaceful atmosphere from earlier gone to? The counter was suddenly enveloped in an atmosphere that felt like a fight was going to break out at any time.

It wasn’t like the proper etiquette that existed during jousting tournaments between knights, but rather more like the feeling between monsters from stories, such as two opposing trolls, clashing in a fistfight.

While Shinobu was saying “This is expensive!” and hiding the plates, Eva was praying to the heavens for today to end safely.

Chapter 16

The Clash Of Masters (Part 2)

“Where I drink my sake is up to me, Lorentz.”

“I’ll return those words right back at you, Holger-san.”

Shinobu had forgotten to bring out the appetizers in such a critical situation. Even Taisho, who had never made a blunder before, charred the grilled shishamo. *(TL: There’s no proper English word for shishamo. Literal translation is Willow Leaf Fish.)*

‘I need to stay strong.’

Eva thought to herself, before she left the counter to serve a bowl of appetizers, which had been filled by Taisho, to Lorentz.

“Welcome! Today’s appetizer is edamame.”

(TL: Edamame are immature soybeans, usually eaten as appetizers accompanying alcohol.)

Even though she decided to speak with a loud voice, it was not heard by the two, who were continuously glaring at each other.

From Eva’s perspective, the two people looked somewhat like giants. Still, she refused to be daunted by that. This time, she put effort into her stomach, and shouted in a louder voice.

“Here’s some edamame appetizers!”

Finally, both of them noticed her.

Lorentz, who seemed to feel embarrassed, received the dish, along with a hot hand towel. His hand was the same as Holger’s, a hand that felt gentle even though it was large.

“See, Holger, this pretty young lady got mad because of you.”

“Shut up, Lorentz. This young lady here is Eva. Etch that into your head, which is filled with nothing but glass.”

Eva quickly ran back behind the counter at the sign of them starting another fight. Taisho presented the burnt shishamo from earlier to Eva.

“Thank you, Eva. Do you eat shishamo?”

Eva nodded vigorously and received the still warm shishamo.

Taisho was a little worried about Shinobu, who had been silent the whole time and had not eaten anything since morning.

Taisho crouching down by the counter and took a piece of shishamo.

Since he would feel sorry if he started from the head, he took a bite from the tail end.

Even though there was a slight bitterness from the burnt skin, the flesh inside was still soft and fluffy, and the umami taste spread inside his mouth. Even though the seasoning was only salt, why was it so delicious?

“Tasty...”

Then came the roe.

The popping texture arrived first, and a different taste danced around on the tongue. Since Eva was very hungry, she had eaten two pieces of shishamo in no time and was licking her fingers. Taisho thought that if it was shishamo, she could’ve eaten ten or twenty pieces.

After Eva finished eating and felt satisfied, she noticed that it was strangely quiet. When she looked up, the customers at the counter were looking over behind the counter.

Eva suddenly felt embarrassed and looked down immediately. She quickly stood up and returned to washing the dishes as if nothing had happened.

While they were looking at the figure of Eva eating the shishamo, the customers by the counter had slightly softened for a time, but the quarrel started again.

“Look at this glass, Lorentz. Can you and your eldest son, whom you are so proud of, make such beautiful glass?”

“If you are going to say that Holger, then look at Taisho handling the squid with the kitchen knife. Such an amazing knife, you and your father probably wouldn’t be able to make that either, right?”

The subject of argument did not seem to end. From Izakaya Nobu's tools to its interior design, everything could be a topic of conversation. Their ability to continue a conversation in this manner was a mutual talent they had.

Shinobue seemed to have broken down completely upon hearing the two drunk people quarreling loudly, and the orders made by them that came up from time to time were taken timidly.

Then finally, when the snacks arrived,

"Between Lorentz's order of hokke and my order of grilled, salted ayu, it's obvious that only mine can satisfy the taste of an adult."

(TL: Hokke – okhotsk atka mackerel, ayu: a species of sweetfish.)

"These thick bacon slices I ordered, are obviously much more delicious than the croquettes that you ordered."

And so on.

To be honest, it was a difficult situation to handle. It looked like they were exchanging snacks, but then they started criticizing each other's choices.

Taisho seemed to have decided not to interfere with those two unless it got out of hand. The only concern he had now was prepping the squids, which he had accidentally stocked up on too much.

However, Eva was slowly getting the hang of handling the two customers.

"Eva-chan, thank you for serving the appetizer a little while ago."

Shinobu, who had taken shelter behind the counter, stuck out her tongue with a "Teehee".

Eva couldn't hate seeing such childishness from Shinobu, who was older than her.

"It's okay. I also want to learn how to work as a waitress someday."

"Thank you for your help. In that case, should I learn how to cook properly as well?"

Shinobu joked around while drinking water, acting like an elder sister.

Even though Eva had a lot of younger siblings, she didn't have an elder sister. Ever since her brother, who was a year older than her, became independent and left, Eva was left as the eldest child in the house.

Since her father's income wasn't that good, they couldn't buy firewood, which was why she had tried to steal the faucet from the store. Such thoughts didn't come to her mind anymore.

She was now employed, and she only needed to work diligently to receive proper wages in order to feed her younger siblings. That was Eva's goal now.

That was when Eva realized something.

"Hey, Eva-chan. What are we going to do about the customers who are quarrelling?"

Eva smiled gently at Shinobu, who was anxiously muttering.

"It's alright. Those two are just having fun."

"Eh?"

It was the same with her younger brothers, who liked to mess with each other. They would quarrel at any given opportunity. Since they were close to each other, quarrelling indefinitely was possible. Otherwise, one of the men would have just punched the other, left his seat, and gone back home.

In the end, even though the two craftsmen were large in size on the outside, on the inside, they were no different from young boys.

After leaving Shinobu, who didn't understand what she meant, she got a plate of yakisoba to eat. Today's yakisoba was specially made, with a fluffy omelette on top of it.

(TL: Yakisoba are stir fried buckwheat noodles, something like chow mein.)

Being able to eat such delicious meals was one of the perks of working at this store.

Since she was able to eat her meals here, Eva endured and ate almost nothing at home. That way, her younger siblings' meals would increase, even if only by a small amount.

Eva held her spoon and fork in front of the yakisoba.

Even though she had not eaten it yet, the creamy egg omelette and the yakisoba's sauce combined harmoniously to produce a miraculous taste in her mouth.

She gulped down her saliva.

The only thing she had eaten since morning was the two pieces of shishamo, and her stomach was completely empty. The spoon dug into the beautifully cooked omelette.

Yet, at that very moment, her younger siblings' faces floated in front of her.

"I'm sorry, Shinobu-san."

"What is it, Eva-chan? It's okay to eat, you know?"

"Actually, I don't have much of an appetite today...even though this was made with so much effort. May I take it back home?"

Her younger siblings had lived life without tasting delicious food.

She had only passed by this store once with her family. During that time, she never thought that she would work at this store. Though she could eat it now, it since she worked here, her younger siblings back home only ate soft bread and soup.

This dish, I want to take it back home.

Eva though sincerely, after seeing the two people still quarreling at the counter.

Shinobu interrupted Eva, who was wondering whether it was futile or not, with a smile.

"Don't worry, Eva-chan."

"What do you mean?"

"You want your younger siblings to eat this, don't you?"

Eva couldn't stop her cheeks from turning red.

She didn't think that she would be so embarrassed at being found out for such a small lie.

When Shinobu whispered something to Taisho, he nodded at Eva as well.

“It’s fine if you eat the omu-soba, Eva-chan. I’ll make something that tastes delicious even when it’s cooled down.”



“O-Okay! Thank you very much!”

Eva replied loudly, as if to cover up her embarrassment, and bowed deeply. Being able to work in this store was a good thing; that pleasant feeling gradually spread through her chest.

After pulling herself together, she held up the spoon and fork again. The usual delicious yakisoba, with an omelette placed on top of it. Even though both dishes were of different kinds, Eva was convinced that this combination would always taste the best.

The moment the spoon met the omelette, a voice rang out from the counter.

“Excuse me, Shinobu-chan. Can I request for the same dish as Eva-chan’s?”

“Oi, oi, don’t try to get a head start on me, Holger. Please...the same one for me as well.”

Those two again.

It seemed that they had began to quarrel about ordering omu-soba this time. Eva grasped the spoon tightly.

“Since I asked earlier than Lorentz, please make mine first.”

“What are you talking about Holger? Such a thing doesn’t matter.”

Inside Eva’s head, something snapped.

“You two! Behave yourselves while you’re eating!”

Holger and Lorentz unintentionally straightened their backs after being shouted at by a girl who was even younger than their own children.

“Y-yes!”

“O-okay!”

After replying involuntarily, both of them felt uncomfortable and awkward. The situation felt like a mother scolding her two little children for quarreling among themselves.

After looking at the two people, who had now started behaving, the tiny older sister of Izakaya Nobu started to dig into her food.

X: Our resident team chef went and made an omusoba as well



Chapter 17

Berthold vs Squid, A Grand Duel In The Store (Part 1)

‘The Goddess of Spring is light-footed.’ This was an ancient saying within the Old Capital.

When winter ended, the Goddess would run across the entire Empire, and green buds would sprout from the earth wherever she went. It was like a blessing of spring that brought forth pleasant warmth to the frozen ground.

At the same time, the goddess who had been worshipped in this land since ancient times was the goddess of love. Even before the virtue and influence of the church had spread across the land, spring had been a season of love for the people.

Despite that, there was a man who heaved a grand sigh during this season.

“In short, I want squid.”

“Squid, huh...”

“Yup, squid.”

The sighing man was Berthold, the commander of the Sentry Corps of the Old Capital. He had forced his way into Izakaya Nobu, which had not opened yet, and was now holding a mug of beer in one hand.

Since he was originally a mercenary, he was well known among the commanders for training his subordinates to be highly disciplined.

He had a well trained body and symmetrical facial features, so there were many women who secretly fell for him.

Yet this Berthold was currently bothered by squid.

“Even Berthold-san unexpectedly has his own preferences, huh. It’s a little surprising.”

Shinobu tilted her head in curiosity as she grilled squid tentacles over a fire by the counter. Berthold had the impression that the store was not wasteful, so he was extra careful when ordering, since he didn’t like squid.

“It’s no use! Even though it’s just squid...”

Berthold gulped down his “Toriaezu Nama” while talking miserably. He was so miserable that, after bringing the tentacles up to his mouth with his chopsticks, he just returned them to the plate. Its taste, smell, and appearance...it was useless for him.

“Why do you suddenly have to eat squid?”

The corps commander slightly hung his head at Taisho’s question.

“Squid will be served at the matchmaking interview...”

Berthold was 32 years old this year, and was already in his prime. Since he was originally a mercenary and was slightly older than his corps commander colleagues, he had many marriage proposals to choose from. Furthermore, Berthold’s matchmaking interview partner was still a sixteen year old girl.

“Even though it’s an arranged interview, it’s not like I don’t know the person. She’s a relative’s daughter. She’s a really good woman.”

“Sixteen years old huh...that’s about half of your age, isn’t it? That’s not much older than Eva-chan...”

“It’s natural to be married with such an age difference here. I even know of couples with three times the age gap.”

Berthold responded to Shinobu’s tasteless retort as she filled his beer mug. In the Old Capital, which was part of the Northern Empire, men were considered adults at a late age, so naturally, their marriageable age was also late. That was why, for the sake of convenience, there were marriages between people of such different ages.

There were even people who got engaged with two-year-olds, but they were exceptions among exceptions.

“The matchmaking partner is the youngest daughter of my brother-in-law’s younger sister. Furthermore, she is good-natured and lovely.”

“Isn’t that good? Berthold-san, won’t you be madly in love?”

“I understand, Shinobu-chan. If the matchmaking interview goes well, I guess I would have to live in a small house with her. No, as a matter of fact, there are already plans for us to live together.”

“So then, where does the squid come into the picture?”

Upon hearing Shinobu’s tactless question, Berthold’s face turned pale, his complexion becoming as white as a squid.

“That is...because her father is the best squid fisherman in town.”

Berthold’s voice trailed off as he answered, and he picked up the squid with his chopsticks once more. However, it didn’t make it to his mouth.

“At this rate, I will be exposed at the matchmaking interview...”

“You’ll definitely be exposed. Absolutely.”

“Even you think so? Unless I overcome this squid, it will be useless.”

“If it is possible for us to help, we will help. After all, I am in your debt for that matter with Eva-chan.”

Even though she hadn’t arrived yet, the store’s dishwasher, Eva, was a girl who commuted from nearby the outer walls of the Old Capital.

Since the store stayed open late, once work ended, Berthold would kindly assign someone from the Sentry Corps to escort her home safely.

“Well, it’s only by chance that the patrol route is in the same direction as her home.”

“Still, I’m grateful for that. After all, if anything were to happen to Eva after her parents entrusted her to us, it would be a serious issue.”

“A sentry guard’s work probably wouldn’t increase even if they were employed to do something like that.”

Young men like Hans and Nikolaus were doing it voluntarily, using the pretense of sending Eva home.

Since the young men were overflowing with enthusiasm, Berthold, as their superior, had no reason to stop them.

One time, Deacon Edwin, the deacon of the church next door, had stopped Berthold as he was heading to Izakaya Nobu to accompany Eva home, and volunteered to go instead. Berthold still didn't know the reason for that. Maybe the deacon simply had a lot of spare time during his day of fasting.

"Anyway, Berthold-san, since there are many squid dishes to prepare, please come back again during business hours."

"Well, sorry for coming before business hours, Shinobu-chan. I bothered Taisho as well. I will return in the evening."

"No, no, we weren't that troubled. Please do come again."

Berthold, who then left the store, didn't know yet.

Taisho had made a mistake while stocking up yesterday, so there was a large amount of squid waiting in Izakaya Nobu today...

Chapter 18

Berthold vs Squid, A Grand Duel In The Store (Part 2)

“Izakaya Nobu is serving squid today, huh.”

Next to Berthold, Deacon Edwin was stroking his beard.

Berthold stared at the characters on the paper that was attached to the sliding door with complicated feelings, like he was welcoming a death sentence.

“Isn’t that good, Berthold? Perhaps they did this just for you?”

“Certainly, it felt like Shinobu-chan was enjoying herself, but it couldn’t be helped. After all, there is not much time left before the interview.”

“There has also been a lot of suspicious activity recently.”

The Empire had been carrying several sources of conflict ever since its formation. Just like the three-headed dragon represented on the Imperial Family’s crest, the Empire had been formed by three lineages. Even now, three hundred years after the founding of the Empire, there was a bloody conflict every time a successor had to be nominated.

Although it was under the direct control of the Empire, the Old Capital retained a high degree of autonomy, since it had little relation with it. That was why there were secret attempts to breakaway from the Empire.

As the commander of the Sentry Corps of the Old Capital, it was one of Berthold’s duties to handle the situation if it arose.

“Ah, there’s that too. That was why the matchmaking date was moved up.”

“So, it will be good if I can overcome it today.”

When Edwin opened the door, the smell of squid inside the store attacked Berthold’s nose. He desperately suppressed his desire to return home and walked in.

“Welcome!”

“...elcome”

They received the usual greetings and sat on the reserved seats by the counter. Shinobu served the appetizer, which was also squid, of course.

“This is squid somen.”

The squid was thinly sliced, making it resemble noodles, and was piled up onto a small plate. Had it been the store’s consideration to serve squid that did not resemble squid?

Instead of squid somen, a small bowl containing something sticky and giving off a strong smell was placed in front of Edwin.

“Deacon, what is that?”

“It’s squid shiokara. It’s made from the internal organs of a squid. It’s sliced and pickled with salt, and it goes well with sake. How’s that? Do you want to try it?”

“No...I’ll refrain from doing so.”

He was unable to overcome the squid itself, so its internal organs were even more impossible for Berthold. To begin with, he wasn’t able to eat anything that had the name “squid” in it.

The somen was followed by squid dango, ginger squid, pickled firefly squid, and fried squid rings. Eva and Shinobu responsibly finished off the dishes that Berthold was not able to eat.



“Berthold-san, aren’t you going to eat this fried squid?”

“You can eat it, Shinobu-chan. I can’t eat it anyway.”

“Then, please don’t mind me. Eva-chan, come and eat too.”

“O-okay.”

Crunch. It made a satisfying sound. The two of them stuffed their mouths with the fried squid. Shinobu placed her hands on her cheek and closed her eyes, while her body trembled slightly.

“After the crunchy texture, there is a soft and chewy texture. Fried squid rings are the best after all!”

“It is just like Shinobu-san. This crispy and springy texture is yummy.”

When he saw the two people eating it like it was delicious, Berthold picked up his chopsticks again.

However, his hand didn't move.

“It's useless. I can't eat it, no matter what...”

“Why are you so bad with squid?”

Shinobu tilted her head while slurping down the squid somen.

Eva, who was eating the squid dango next to her, muttered something that she suddenly thought of.

“Erm, it might be my wild guess...but did something happen to Commander Berthold in the past, that caused his dislike towards squid?”

Berthold shook slightly after hearing that.

“Did something happen?”

After seeing Shinobu's questioning face, Berthold resigned himself and gradually began talking.

“I was brought up by my great grandfather in a small village in the mountains, which was known for its mercenaries. I worked as a sailor there, during my younger days.”

Being a sailor was different from being a fisherman. He had worked on a merchant ship that could carry about fifty to a hundred people and transported luggage from the south to the west.

Even though he had not been used to life onboard a ship, the pay had been sufficient. Since his parents had been able to retire, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that Berthold's family had been an influential and wealthy household in the village.

As a child, Berthold had not experienced any inconvenience when it came to food or a place to sleep.

"I don't know whether Shinobu-chan knows this or not, but the world we are on now is, in fact, round."

Deacon Edwin judged that Berthold's story was going to take a turn for the worse, so he left his seat and went to another table with his sake cup and plate. It was a silent declaration that he wouldn't listen to the story.

"It's round, huh..."

Shinobu forced out a response while Eva, squid still in her mouth, was fascinated upon hearing that for the first time.

"My great grandfather said that there is a lot of evidence that the world is round. For instance, the mast of a distant ship would appear first, followed by its hull and so on. The entire ship didn't appear right away. That is why he said that the world is round."

"Wow...amazing!"

"Does Eva-chan understand?"

"Yes! If the world is round, it is convenient because I can begin traveling to the west and return from the east, I think!"

Berthold nodded at Eva's correct answer.

"That is true. But, there is a big problem there."

His great grandfather's employer also thought the same thing as Eva, so he set out in a ship to pioneer a new sea route. However, they were involved in a terrible accident and did not return.

“What on earth could be the cause?”

Shinobu asked while eating the pickled firefly squid.

“Squid...”

An innumerable amount of squid were said to have blocked the sailors’ path. The area of the sea that sailors called the “End of the World” did not look blue. Instead, the surface was filled with squid, like they were engulfing the sea.

“It was three parts blue and seven parts white. In other words, 70% of the sea surface was packed with squid. Every sailor who saw the spectacle said so.”

Berthold’s face turned completely pale as he spoke.

The valiant Berthold, said to be one of the top five swordsman in the Old Capital, looked like he was shrinking miserably.

“When I heard the story from great grandfather, it was very, very frightening... that is why I cannot eat squid.”

“So there was such a reason...”

Berthold rolled up his sleeve and showed Eva, who had almost wept in sympathy, an old scar on his left arm.

“This wound was also caused by a squid.”

“Eh, Commander Berthold fought against a squid before?”

“No, that’s not it. There was a mercenary who had a squid crest on his helm...when I saw that, I flinched momentarily and was injured by his attack...”

There was a heavy silence in the store.

Mere dislike could be easily managed through drastic measures. However, if it was dominated by intense fear, it could be impossible to overcome the squid phobia so easily.

That kind of an atmosphere began to fill the restaurant.

“Are squids really that frightening to you...?”

Berthold vigorously nodded in response to Eva's muttering.

"I had to have confidence in my abilities, or at least believe that I did. Otherwise, I wouldn't be fit for the title of Commander of the Sentry Corps."

"That is probably true."

Before Berthold had noticed, Edwin had returned to the counter and was reaching for the pickled firefly squid with his chopsticks.

"Well, to be honest, I think that if you were to see a ten-armed monster that was larger than me, you would be scared as well."

"Huh...?"

Everyone in the store tilted their head at Berthold's words.

"Eh, did I say something strange?"

Shinobu timidly raised her hand, as if she were representing everyone in the store.

"You're talking about squid, right?"

"Yes, I'm talking about squid."

Everyone except Berthold shut their mouth, wearing an awkward expression. The one who broke the silence was Eva.

"Taisho-san, are any intact squid left?"

"Y-yes, there is still some left."

After saying so, Taisho brought out a big Japanese flying squid and laid it down in front of Berthold.

Even though it was already dead, it looked like it had still been alive recently.

(TL: Japanese Flying Squid = Pacific Flying Squid)

“Berthold-san, this is a squid.”

“Ah, is this possibly a young squid? If it’s only this size, I can somehow manage looking straight at it.”

“No, this is an adult squid...”

At Eva’s declaration, Berthold brought his hands to his mouth, lost in thought. He even started to shake nervously, which was a rare thing for him to do.

“Then, is it just an exceptionally small species...?”

“Nope, this size is normal. If you are talking about small species, then it’s the firefly squid that Deacon Edwin is eating.”

Berthold became silent; everyone else did as well.

Deacon Edwin hesitantly opened his mouth while stroking his beard.

“Berthold, could it be...that you were pranked by your great grandfather?”

After taking two deep breaths, Berthold, who had been staring at the ceiling, grasped his chopsticks. He took a piece of squid sashimi from the plate, dipped it in soy sauce, and threw it into his mouth.

It had a unique, chewy texture, along with a hint of sweetness that he thoroughly enjoyed.

“Taisho! From the array of dishes just now, please make that one again!”

“Which one?”

“The round one that Shinobu-chan and Eva-chan were eating. The crunchy one!”

“Ah, the fried squid.”

Meanwhile, Berthold threw the remaining squid dishes on the counter into his mouth, one after another. Then he washed it down with “Toriaezu Nama”.

“Delicious! It goes well with the beer.”

Berthold happily bit on the grilled squid, which was smeared with a healthy helping of mayonnaise, and followed it with a gulp of ale.

“Damn it! That old geezer...if squid are small, you should’ve said so!”

Berthold finished every squid dish the store had to offer, one after another, while grumbling and complaining.

“With how things look now, I guess it is no longer necessary to worry about the matchmaking interview, right?”

“That’s true. Well, instead of disliking it, it might have become my favourite dish?”

“That’s really good then.”

When they saw Berthold’s expression of having completely overcome his fear of squid, everyone felt relieved. Any anxiety that had been present before disappeared, replaced by smiles on everyone’s faces.

On the day of the matchmaking interview, the potential bride’s father presented the largest squid that had ever caught. However, that is a story for a different time.

Chapter 19

A Strange Woman (Part 1)

The hoarse voices of street vendors could be heard in the distance. Since it was gradually getting warmer in the Old Capital, many people walked by on the road in front of the store at dusk, when it was cooler, to heal their fatigue from work.

Izakaya Nobu also benefited from this, since it became busier by drawing in not only the regulars, but also newcomers, who came in after glancing around when it was open. During winter, warm dishes like stew were favored, but now that it was spring, rich and vibrant dishes had become the trend.

Shinobu had received ten orders of sansai tempura from curious customers on this day alone.

(TL: sansai: mountain herb/vegetables)



Even though the tempura in “Nobu” was exceptionally delicious eaten with its specially made tenstuyu sauce, it was also delicious when paired with salt and ale.

The crunchy texture that resulted from Taisho's skill in deep-frying tempura, something he took pride in, and the slightly bitter aftertaste of the mountain herbs were best when paired with ale.

"Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Hans and Nikolaus, who were occupying the seats by the counter, were relishing the tempura and their cups of ale.

They usually came after the sun had completely set and the sky had turned dark, but these past few days, they had been visiting the store before dusk and carousing after work.

"Is this alright, you two? Drinking this early?"

"Don't say such gloomy things, Shinobu-chan. I came only after finishing my training and normal work properly."

"As Hans said, we're not doing anything that would make us feel guilty."

The only reason these two could talk like that and get drunk in such a carefree manner was because the Company Commander, Berthold, had left for the northern port city.

According to the news they had received the day before yesterday, the matchmaking interview had been a success. It seemed that he would only return after completing the marriage ceremony on the other side.

Since the 'Demon Commander' was not there, training ended early.

"But...won't Berthold be angry when he returns? Saying that you have slacked off or gotten dull."

"Don't say such scary things, Shinobu-chan. Since we're drinking here, let's avoid thinking about it at all."

"Wouldn't it be unpleasant if we drank more every time something unpleasant was said?"

Shinobu just smiled at their words and returned her attention to the store.

Were there any empty glasses or plates? Were there any guests who wanted to order? She could provide good hospitality by grasping these things instantaneously. If she offered the customers a place to relax and time to rest, there wouldn't be any dissatisfaction.

It was so ingrained into Shinobu's body that you could already call it a subconscious habit.

The way Shinobu weaved between laughing guests as she served drinks at each table made her look like she was dancing.

While she was exchanging a customer's mug, she noticed something strange. There was a rare, female customer in Nobu, and her orders were strange as well.

"Is there anything wrong, Shinobu-chan? You look like someone cheated on you."

"Ah, it's not really a big deal, Hans-san."

"What? What is it, Shinobu-chan? Don't be shy, tell this big brother Nikolaus."

"No, it's really nothing."

While saying so and refusing them gently, she looked at the lady customer again. As expected, it was still a strange. The woman was around twenty years old, had blonde hair, and was wearing clothes similar to those of a merchant's wife. She was definitely a beautiful woman surrounded by a nice atmosphere.

"Hmmm, is there something wrong with that customer?"

Hans noticed Shinobu's line of sight and quietly whispered to her.

There was a piece of fukinotou tempura held in between his chopsticks. Hans seemed to have liked it so much that he had ordered another helping of assorted mountain herb tempura.

Since there were other guests around, she responded with an ambiguous nod.

(TL: Fukinotou is butterbur sprouts. It looks similar to brussel sprouts, so I'm guessing that they are in the same family?)

The dishes that the blonde woman ordered were all dry foods.

Dried squid, nuts, and cheese; all of these could be stolen and taken out of the store.

If she had ordered sake with them, it could have been explained as personal preference. However, she had not ordered a single drop of alcohol since stepping foot into the store.

“How strange.”

Nikolaus muttered while snatching a bracken tempura from Hans’ plate.

“Strange? What is?”

“The woman that Shinobu-chan is watching, the blonde one. She has been peeping at her surroundings since a little earlier.”

“She certainly doesn’t seem like she is eating her meal calmly.”

Hans agreed as he stole a piece of assorted skewered meat from Nikolaus’ plate. Certainly, once they started paying attention, she did seem strange. People normally only looked around the store in the beginning, since the store offered a new and unusual experience.

“Is she plotting something?”

“Stop it, Nikolaus. She doesn’t look calm enough to be plotting something.”

“That’s true. Even if she is plotting something, what is there to plot against in a tavern?”

“I don’t think she’s plotting something in the tavern. There is also the possibility that it is an investigation.”

“Investigation? What is there to investigate?”

Nikolaus looked around in an unnatural manner, before lowering his voice and whispering.

“The supply route in the Old Capital.”

“Supply route?”

“Shinobu-chan might not know this, but the neighbourhood has a suspicious atmosphere around it nowadays.”

Hans nodded as he tossed the kogomi tempura into his mouth.

(TL: kogomi: ostrich fern, another mountain herb)

“Although merchants might have various methods to earn profits, liquor vendors have their own methods.”

Nikolaus continued as he skillfully ate the kebab, which was dripping with meat juices, with one hand.

Liquor vendors made contracts to supply the military, as well as mercenaries who had been hired by royalty and nobility, with goods in exchange for payment. They often had to travel through dangerous areas, so they made a sizable profit.

“When a war breaks out, a quick-witted liquor vendor will send scouts into town and predict where the army will go, in order to investigate what goods can be bought cheaply, or what required goods are hard to obtain. Something like that. Doing that makes trading easier when the army arrives.”

“You sure know strange things, Nikolaus.”

“Shut it. I had an ex-girlfriend who was the daughter of a liquor vendor. Continuing the story...”

Recently, there had been rumours that some northern territories were planning to withdraw from the Empire.

The rumors had already been around for some time, and there were supposedly plans to merge several territories into one. It was said that they would go back to how they looked before the Empire was formed.

Although only a minority thought that it could be done, rumors of an external collaborator had begun emerging. The neighbouring countries believed that the power of the Empire had dropped, and Nikolaus suspected that the Eastern Kingdom was the one manipulating things behind the scenes.

“Either way, this neighbourhood has become a little suspicious. It even caught Commander Berthold’s attention...”

“If a real liquor vendor has appeared, the stories are more than just a rumour, Nikolaus.”

Nikolaus nodded as he downed the jug of ale, and his face changed from that of a drunkard to one of a soldier.

From behind the counter, Nobuyuki and Eva curiously watched the three people whisper secretively.

‘For Taisho and Eva’s sake, as well as the store’s continued peace, I must determine that woman’s true intentions.’

Shinobu had made up her mind.

However, where to start?

As she considered this, the blond woman raised her hand..

“Excuse me, may I order?”

Chapter 20

A Strange Woman (Part 2)

“Yes, I’m coming!”

After changing her expression so that it would not be suspicious, Shinobu went and took the blonde woman’s order. She really was a beautiful lady on closer inspection. If someone were to say that she was an actress from an old Hollywood movie, people might have believed it.

The woman pointed to the menu on the wall and asked,

“This, kyuri tsukemono...is it different from cucumber sauerkraut?”

(TL: kyuri tsukemono: pickled Japanese cucumbers)

“No, it isn’t pickled the way sauerkraut is pickled. Our store’s pickles were pickled using a different method, a method that our store is proud of.”

Fuun~. The lady settled her long index finger on her well shaped jaw, showing a seemingly hesitant gesture.

She had a slightly husky voice, and a seductive presence emanated from her gestures. Even Shinobu, who was of the same sex, felt captivated by her.

“Then, I’ll have that.”

“Certainly. Would you like something to drink?”

“I’ll pass, thank you.”

Shinobu gave a slight bow to the blonde woman, who was smiling sweetly, and left to pass the orders to Nobuyuki, who was by the counter. Even though it was just orders for tsukemono, she still had to stop by the counter.

When Shinobu returned from the counter, Nikolaus, who had been observing the situation, made a sullen face.

“It really is suspicious. With her order, the possibility that she is a liquor vendor has further increased.”

“Really?”

Nikolaus subtly cleared his throat and put on a proud expression, clearly enjoying his opportunity to continue the explanation.

“Sauerkraut lasts a long time, so it will come in handy as a food source for the army during long distance marches.”

“Is that so? I just thought the army would choose it because it is delicious.”

“If soldiers are only served dry bread and diluted soup, it will result in dissatisfaction. However, it is impossible to provide vegetables for all of them. Purchasing thousands of vegetables from the market is also impossible.”

“So, sauerkraut is used instead?”

Nikolaus moistened his throat with ale.

“Technically, the shelf life of preserved sauerkraut isn’t that long. Even though it’s normally sour, it tastes worse the longer it is kept.”

“So that’s why it isn’t strange if they are interested in this new method of pickling.”

If there was only sauerkraut, anyone would get tired of it. That was why, if they were able to prepare tsukemono, it was possible that something new could be made in the future. Even though Shinobu didn’t understand military issues well, she knew that the soldiers would prefer eating delicious meals.

It was no wonder that a liquor vendor would be interested in it.

“That is right, Shinobu-chan. It is indeed different for people with a brain, unlike Hans.”

“Hey, hey, what do you mean by that?”

While the two people were fighting for the beef doteyaki that Nikolaus had ordered, Shinobu was in deep thought.

The suspicion that the woman was a liquor vendor was getting stronger.

However, what could she, an ordinary waitress, do by herself?

(TL: beef doteyaki: simmered beef in miso sauce)

“Ne, what do you think Taisho?”

Taisho had been frying tempura, so he was surprised at being called out so suddenly.

Since there were many orders for deep-fried and grilled food today, Taisho had been cooking with exceptional concentration.

“It might be different from what you are thinking.”

“Eh, why?”

“That woman doesn’t have the face of a liquor vendor. That is purely my guess though.”

As he said so, Taisho glared at Nikolaus.

“Shinobu-chan is rather gullible, so please don’t put strange thoughts into her head, Nikolaus-san.”

“No, but, Taisho. I don’t think that there are any holes in my reasoning.”

“If you think that you are right, wouldn’t it be better to stop drinking and go back to the barracks? Commander Berthold might not be here, but you should plan early countermeasures.”

“Ahh, no, that’s...true.”

When Nobuyuki said that, Nikolaus flinched.

“Kyaa, Taisho is a little scary today.”

Hans tried to seek Eva’s help, but she responded coldly as she busied herself with washing the dishes.

“I am this busy because Shinobu-san got involved in a strange conversation. Of course, Hans is also involved in this crime.”

“Y-yes.”

Shinobu tried to sneak away from the counter while the two were withering beneath the glares, but-

“Shinobu-san, there seem to be empty plates on the second table. Please clear it and give them to me. It will be tough if they accumulate later.”

Eva said with a piercing smile. When Shinobu looked at Nobuyuki, he shrugged his shoulders, as if agreeing with Eva.

Shinobu started working diligently, scared of what would happen if she didn't work seriously.

However, she didn't forget to keep one eye on the woman.

“So, how would Taisho explain the suspicious actions of that woman?”

By the counter, Nikolaus repeated his conjecture that the woman was a liquor vendor to Taisho. Hans seemed to have tired of hearing about it, and he busied himself by drinking his ale together with his mountain herb tempura.

“I think it is merely an appointment.”

“Appointment?”

“Yes, probably. An appointment with a man, at this store.”

Taisho answered as he transferred mountain herbs from the tempura batter to the oil.

Even though ‘Nobu’ changed the oil everyday, the oil was a deeper colour today, since there had been many orders that used it.

“First of all, she didn't drink alcohol. This can be explained if she is meeting someone. After putting in the effort to dress up for a date, it would not be wise to drink immediately after getting here, before even meeting the other person.”

“That's true.”

“The part about eating snacks as well. Isn’t that because the stomach will swell and feel unpleasant if you eat a heavy dish? If she plans to eat with him somewhere else later, it wouldn’t be good to eat too much now.”

“I see. You have a point.”

Although Nikolaus was pretending to be calm on the outside, he was a little overwhelmed by Taisho’s reasoning.

Unbeknownst to him, Taisho was a fan of detective and mystery dramas, and he had watched all of the rebroadcasts and recordings many times.

“Why did she order tsukemono then?”

“That is insignificant. She probably thought something like, ‘Since my mouth is dry after eating dry snacks, let’s have a change of flavour’. It is a mistake beginners always fall for. Everything will be suspicious if you watch with suspicion.”

Shinobu, didn’t dare to retort to Nobuyuki’s words, even though he was also a beginner, while Nikolaus slowly raised his hands in surrender.

Hans, who was sitting beside him, splendidly grabbed the opportunity to steal a fried quail egg from Nikolaus’ dish.

“By the way, what is Eva-chan’s opinion?”

Nikolaus involved Eva in the discussion, as if he wanted to continue the topic. However, he did not expect the girl’s answer.

“That guest-san...is a man.”

“Eh?”

While Nobuyuki, Nikolaus, Hans, and Shinobu were all completely dumbfounded, the restaurant’s sliding door opened.

“Welcome!”

“...’elcome.”

It was a merchant-like man who looked approximately 22 or 23 years old. The man ignored Shinobu's greetings and stepped up to the blonde woman.

"How is it? As expected, was your disguise as a woman exposed?"

"Don't be stupid. No one suspected a thing. That five silver coins is mine."

When the blonde woman answered, they could hear a rough, deep voice. Obviously, it was a man's voice. Had the voice from before been an act?

When looked at closely, one could see that their height was certainly a little on the taller side for a woman.

"Since it would be unpleasant go to the bathroom, I had to abstain from drinking this whole time."

"I get it. I get it. I will pay the bill. Two silver coins should be sufficient. I'll place them here as payment."

The man placed two silver coins on the table. However, that was too much payment for just the tsukemono and dry snacks.

"Customer-san, this is too much!"

"The remaining amount is the compensation fee. Please keep it."

While looking at the backs of the two generous people who left the store into the night, Eva muttered,

"Liquor vendor, eh..."

Nikolaus, who heard it, held his beer mug out and silently hung his head.



The two customers

Chapter 21

Of Spies and Salads (Part 1)

It was by pure coincidence that Jean François de la Vinnie, from the Eastern Kingdom, walked through Izakaya Nobu's doors.

As long as it was a store that an average resident of the town would visit, it was fine for Jean. In that sense, 'Nobu' matched his criteria.

Even though his outward appearance was that of a monk, Jean wasn't actually a monk.

To be exact, monks had a secret role in the Eastern Kingdom.

Collectors of Mysterious Tales.

Also called 'Otogishu', they were a group of people who, in order to entertain the royal families of the Eastern Kingdom, collected and compiled strange and unusual stories from various places around the continent. All they had to do was recite those stories.

However, this type of work had another aspect to it.

Spying. In exchange for receiving support from the Eastern Kingdom, they reported information about local politics and circulating rumours to aid the king in making policies and plans.

As the right hand man of the Otogishu chief, Jean François de la Vinnie, who turned thirty five this year, was assigned to investigate the main territory of the Empire while undercover as a Collector of Mysterious Tales, due to his excellent capabilities.

He had probably been dispatched to the Old Capital because of the region's importance to the Eastern Kingdom.

"Welcome!"

"... 'elcome"

Jean was greeted with a pleasant welcome and a clean atmosphere when he opened the unusual sliding glass door.

As it was a store on the outskirts of the Empire, this resulted in the first passing mark from Jean.

Izakaya Nobu seemed like a suitable place for people to relax after a long day at work, making them more loose with their words. It was a perfect place for Jean to collect gossip and rumours.

There were only a few customers, as it was still early in the day.

Jean decided to choose a seat by the counter, since he wanted to hear stories from the store owner.

The counter was clean, and he was able to make out the high quality woodgrains of the counter.

“Here’s the appetizer.”

A meal course called amuse gueule was served before the entree in the Eastern Kingdom. Maybe this was something similar. There were some slightly large beans in a bowl, shining an emerald green colour.

“What’s this?”

“They are boiled, salted soramame. Please try some. Would you also like to have a drink?”

(TL: soramame: broad beans/fava beans)

“As you can see, I am a monk on a pilgrimage.”

“Excuse me.”

Even though there was a man in the garb of a priest by the corner of the counter drinking while hiding his glass awkwardly, Jean did not mind.

He had already abandoned his conviction as a monk through his various travels everywhere.

“Ah, I would like to have a salad.”

Asking for salad in a pub was Jean’s method of investigation.

Fresh vegetables could not be preserved, and they were not suited for long distance transportation. Therefore, by ordering salad, he could estimate the strength of the city.

“What kind of salad do you prefer?”

“Are there many kinds of salad in this store?”

Jea involuntarily asked, due to the waitress’s unexpected answer.

Normally, when one ordered salad in a pub, there was only one kind.

Unless there was an abundance of vegetables available in the city, making a variety of salads was difficult. Outside of royalty and nobility, only a limited amount of vegetables could be procured.

Even though Jean assumed that the Old Capital was a strategic location in the Northern Empire, it was merely an ancient historical place. He was interested in knowing what kind of salad they served here.

“Yes, this store’s Taisho has been devoted to making salads nowadays.”

“I see. Then I would like to try various kinds of salad. Even though the other dishes seem good, please only bring me salad.”

“If it is like that, do you want us to reduce the serving size for each plate, so that you can enjoy the different kinds of salad?”

“I would be grateful if that can be done.”

Even if there were different kinds of salad, they probably wouldn’t amount to much. When you looked at it closely, it would either come off as pretentious, or a bluff.

In any case, Jean just wanted to eat vegetables badly.

He looked around the interior of the store while drinking the glass of boiled water that had cooled down.

Apparently, this building had a foreign interior design. The atmosphere was also different from the pubs he had visited during his trip between the Eastern Kingdom and the Empire.

On the contrary, this kind of store was a good place to measure the status of the town.

That was Jean’s conclusion from his past experiences.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. This is a Caesar salad with soft boiled eggs.”



The first dish was a salad mainly composed of lettuce with soft boiled eggs sitting atop the bed of lettuce. This kind of salad had never been seen before in the Eastern Kingdom, which was considered to be advanced in the culinary field.

“Caesar salad? I’ve not seen this before.”

“Please eat it by mixing the eggs on top.”

After mixing the small bowl of salad with the fork and spoon he was handed, he placed some on a small plate.

He did not notice when it was served, but there was finely chopped stir fried bacon, grated cheese, and fine fried bread crumbs in it, making this salad dish look lively.

“Shinobu-san, is that the salad I had before?”

The old priest by the counter asked the waitress.

“Didn’t the one you ate have schnitzel in it? Taisho has been saying he wants to practice other dishes besides his field of specialty ever since.”

“Hou? Isn’t that good?”

“It’s not good. He’s only been practicing salad recipes for some time now, so the salad menu keeps increasing.”

“I see. But, isn’t this a good opportunity? This guest here seems to like salad a lot.”

The priest seemed to want to ask something, but slightly bowed towards Jean instead.

He tried to remember if he had met the priest anywhere, but his mind only drew blanks. Jean returned the bow and turned his attention back to the salad.

Crunch.

Munch munch.

The texture of the fresh lettuce intertwined with the taste of the soft boiled egg, changing its taste to a rich and deep flavour.

In addition, the slightly salty crispy fried bacon and the fine bread crumbs highlighted the crunchy texture even more, enhancing the flavour further.

“This is splendid!”

Using and combining these ingredients wasn’t that unusual.

It felt like the store was being a little greedy by serving food with these kinds of ingredients, but these ingredients could probably be gathered in large cities, too. However, the combination of flavours and textures was really wonderful.

The technique used to draw out the maximum potential of this salad could be describe as a form of art.

In reality, Jean was not hoping to find this kind of salad in this pub.

If it was this Caesar salad, then it wouldn’t be strange if it was served at dinner parties of the Imperial Court in the Eastern Kingdom.

However, it was still just a salad.

They had focused on the technique, but on the other hand, it was only that.

It was not a significant enough plate of salad to use to analyze the condition of the Old Capital.

Jean did not know if it was a technique forged over the long history of the Old Capital, or if it was the foreign wisdom of this particular pub.

However, the Eastern Kingdom wouldn't be intimidated by a simple plate of salad.

"Was it satisfactory?"

"It was really a wonderful salad. I am impressed."

"That's good to hear. It is also very popular back in my hometown."

"I see. So, what is the next salad?"

"Right! The next salad is daikon salad!" (*TL: Daikon is Japanese Radish*)



The next salad that came out appeared to be a finely sliced white vegetable with a pinkish, creamy sauce over it.

This was also a dish that Jean had not seen before.

He timidly put a slice into his mouth and was surprised by the unexpected crunchy texture from the white vegetable.

At first, he had thought that it was a soggy salad and would have a weak taste. However, the slightly salty, yet smooth creamy sauce mixed with the salad, and the deep, profound flavour was enhanced many fold.

"What are these vegetables?"

“It’s a daikon, sliced into many fine slices.”

The waitress took out a stump, the only remaining part of the daikon.

Even though it looked similar to the white carrots found in the Empire, it was far thicker than them.

Jean knew that, unlike this daikon, no matter how long you left the white carrot, it would only grow as big as a child’s foot.

“This vegetable certainly has an interesting texture. Also, I would like to ask something else. What is this sauce on top? I have never seen a sauce with such a vivid pink colour before.”

“That is due to cod roe, the eggs of a cod fish. When you squeeze it and mix the sauce, it changes to this colour.”

“Cod’s... egg?”

Even though the vegetable called daikon was interesting, the problem was the fish eggs.

For instance, cod was a common fish that was eaten in the coastal states of the Empire.

Jean, too, had eaten the eggs more than once.

The problem was that the Old Capital was inland.

The town was a strategic point for the northern part of the Empire, and it was connected to the sea by means of water transport through rivers and canals that flowed north.

However, Jean wasn’t able to believe that marine products were easily transported from there to enter the mouths of the common people here.

Before visiting here, Jean had looked through all of the intel regarding the water transportation of the Old Capital.

It was no exaggeration that the daikon and cod roe used in this salad had overturned the expectations he had of the situation here.

It was unthinkable that the Empire or the Old Capital’s city council had purposefully hidden the volume of supply circulation through water transportation.

“This salad is also wonderful.”

“Did you like it? Next is...this salad.”

Jean started being wary and paid attention to the next dish, but what he saw was far from what he had expected.

Chapter 22

Of Spies and Salads (Part 2)

“Are those mashed potatoes? If they are, then I have already eaten it many times, before I came to the capital.”

No matter how you looked at it, the mashed potatoes served to Jean looked ordinary. When he saw them, he couldn't hide his disappointment, since the previous two dishes had been things that he had never seen before.

If he had known that it would turn out like this, he would have preferred getting fresh vegetables sprinkled with salt instead.

In Jean's eyes, the people of the Empire seemed to love their potatoes.

Ever since he began his assignment and traveled from the Kingdom to the Empire, he had been served nothing but mashed potatoes. He was getting tired of it.

“Nope, this is potato salad.”



“Even if you change the name, the contents will still be the same. I do not appreciate being deceived like this.”

They had showed off and claimed to be able to serve many kinds of salads in the beginning, so maybe they actually resorted to copying other salads.

His evaluation of the Old Capital, which he had been reviewing with great pains, crumbled to the ground.

“That’s not true. If you think you are being cheated, and please take a bite and see for yourself.”

“What a stubborn girl...if you say so, I will only take a single bite. But, I will only say this...”

As soon as he put it into his mouth, an unexpected taste silenced him.

It had an indescribable creamy taste, combined with a hint of sourness. He had been expecting the potatoes to taste bland, but it tasted like something else entirely.

“What? What is this?”

Jean cleared his throat after he saw the waitress tilt her head, not knowing how to respond.

This was clearly different from mashed potatoes. Something was probably mixed into it, but he did not know what it was.

Using the carrots and cucumbers to add a visual impact was certainly well done, and it was a dish befitting of the name ‘salad’.

“It’s as miss said, this is indeed not mashed potatoes. I’m sorry for doubting you. I apologize.”

“It’s alright. When you use a lot of mayonnaise, it will taste different from mashed potatoes, after all.”

“Mayonnaise?”

“Yes. It’s a condiment made from egg yolk, oil, and vinegar. It’s delicious, you know.”

When Jean asked about that unfamiliar word, the waitress explained it to him with a smile. Did she not have any caution?

“I see. I have not heard of such a condiment. I’ve learned something new.”

“Is that so? That’s good, then. That reminds me, the potato salad will taste even better if you do this.”

She took out a small, wooden salt grinder.

Ground rock salt was a seasoning that was also widely used in the Eastern Kingdom. Although it was a surprise to see such a thing within the Old Capital, what on earth would she do with it?

Even if rock salt was added to this partially-eaten potato salad right now, it was difficult to imagine that the taste would improve dramatically.

Jean, who was watching the waitress’s hands while idly thinking about such things, noticed something strange.

The rock salt that was being sprinkled, was black.

No, this wasn’t rock salt at all.

There were stories of coloured rock salts within the “Collectors of Mysterious Tales” group that he belonged to. However, they were only extremely pale pink or even lighter.

Then, what on earth was this black thing?

“Now then, please enjoy.”

Jean prepared himself and faced the potato salad in front of him for a second time.

The previous taste was still fresh in his mind. The only difference now was to find out what those black grains were. With that, Jean brought the spoon to his mouth.

“Eh...”

A sharp flavor spread through his mouth. It was entirely different from the sting he felt from salt.

It was even more stimulating, and truly enhanced the flavor of the potato salad. Jean recognized this taste.

“It couldn’t be. Pepper?”

“Yes. Don’t you think it tasted better, even with just a little bit of that?”

Improved the taste? Enhanced?

It was only natural. Even though the value of pepper had dropped slightly, it was once said to be worth its weight in gold and silver.

This wasn’t even meat. For it to be used in a salad so readily, what luxury.

Delicious. Even though it was frustrating, he had to admit it.

Since mixing pepper into potato salad cost a lot, he couldn’t enjoy it regularly. He understood this, and his fear only rose.

With this, it could be implied that the Old Capital had the financial capability to use pepper on a daily basis.

Perhaps there was a wealthy merchant among the city councilmen who imported huge amounts of pepper and sold the leftovers to the city.

A city that could do such a thing didn’t exist within the Eastern Kingdom.

“I’m amazed. This potato salad is truly delicious!”

“Yes! I think that if it’s cooked this way, potatoes can also be eaten deliciously.”

Wasn’t that obvious? Jean desperately withheld his bitter thoughts.

As soon as he left the pub, he would have to leave the inn and return to the Eastern Kingdom. Even though there were more things to investigate, bringing this prompt report was even more important. He feared that he wouldn’t be able to recover if he made a mistake.

The Eastern Kingdom’s plans to tear apart the Empire’s territories would have to be reconsidered. These people could do as they wished if they wanted to be independent from the Empire, but any trace of the Eastern Kingdom had to be completely erased.

He tried to leave quickly by leaving money on the table, but he accidentally overheard the conversation between the waitress and the store owner.

“Taisho, since he ate it so deliciously, let’s put out another plate.”

“Another one, huh. Even though those three salads were already a perfect combination.”

“It doesn’t have to be a salad, I think. As long as it looks like a salad.”

“Looks like a salad, huh...Ah! No way. No way. I’m going to eat that with my evening drink. It’s expensive, you know. It came all the way from Norway.”

“Why not? Come on, don’t be stingy.”

Oh, what was that?

The insatiable curiosity he had picked up from being part of the “Collectors of Mysterious Tales” made Jean freeze in place. This was a store that used a generous amount of pepper without hesitation.

If he wasn’t interested in this, he was not qualified to call himself one of the Otogishu.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting!”

Some thinly sliced meat was placed in front of Jean’s.

It might have been fish meat, but he couldn’t tell just by looking at it.

The sauce that came with it looked similar to a sauce that came with dishes in the Holy Kingdom of the South.

“This is carpaccio.” (*TL: thinly sliced meat served as appetizer*)

Even though the waitress announced the name while brimming with confidence, she did not mention what kind of meat it was.

That being said, he decided to try it. Since he was hesitant to use a fork to stab it, he picked it up with his fingers and brought it to his mouth.

Soft.

He couldn’t have imagined that this tenderness came from an animal’s meat. Even though there was a slight smell of blood, it wasn’t to the extent that it stank. He unconsciously threw two slices into his mouth.

Jean didn’t know whether he was chewing it or whether it was just melting away. Was there such a meat?

When he looked at the waitress, she was staring at him with amusement.

Considering her mischievous eyes, she was definitely challenging him to figure out what meat it was.

“This meat...is soft.”

That was all Jean could utter. He felt ashamed for not knowing the answer. Even though he had eaten various kinds of meat so far in his life, he did not remember any that were similar to this.

Beef, pork, lamb, chicken, and even horse.

This meat didn't resemble any of those.

“Do you give up?”

“Ah, I surrender. What is this meat?”

He decided to return to the Eastern Kingdom after hearing the answer.

He also decided to request to be unassigned from the Empire. This country had too many incomprehensible things.

“This meat is...the tail of a whale!”



A whale. Jean could not possibly understand immediately.

He had unconsciously been expecting something like ‘a cow that had been raised in a special way’, but the answer was too unexpected. His head wanted to reject the waitress’s answer.

“Whale?”

“That’s right. Erm, it’s a huge fellow that lives in the sea.”

Jean was a member of the ‘Collectors of Mysterious Tales’, so he knew about whales.

There were fishing methods to catch whales as well.

However, that was a story from the past, a story from a far, far-away land. The Otogishu archives didn’t even have records of the consumption of whales anywhere within the reach of the Eastern Kingdom.

Jean had become the first man from the Eastern Kingdom to ever eat a whale.

Jean felt a chill run down his back.

He shouldn’t get involved with the Old Capital. This was only a pub on the outskirts of the city.

‘Curiosity killed the cat.’ Jean François de la Vinnie prioritised his duty as a Holy Knight of the Kingdom over his role in Otogishu.

“This is definitely an excellent meal. I am very satisfied.”

“Really?! I am happy to be able to receive such words.”

He took a horseshoe-shaped silver coin from the coin pouch on his waist and pressed it into the smiling waitress’s hand.

“Since I remembered some urgent business I must attend to, I will leave now. The food was excellent. Thank you very much.”

When Jean vigorously stood up from his counter stool, the old priest by the corner smiled and bowed slightly.

“Do be careful on your way back, okay.”

When he heard the priest’s words of caution, Jean rushed out of the store without looking back. Had that old priest actually been a spy from the Empire?

The Kingdom had carefully assigned Jean to infiltrate the Empire, but perhaps the intelligence and activities of ‘Otogishu’ had already been leaked out to their enemies.

Before he had realized it, it had become completely dark outside.

He decided to escape as soon as possible.

Right now, the only thing determining Jean's actions was his strong desire to escape from this place.

However, he was also thinking that he wanted to try that Caesar salad one more time.

Chapter 23

Side Story: Eva in Wonderland (Part 1)

There were many strange things that could be seen in Izakaya Nobu. One of them was the miniature altar that decorated the wall by the counter. Even though the task of cleaning before the store opened was left to Shinobu and Eva, Taisho was the only one who cleaned this wooden shrine everyday.

Once, when Eva accidentally came on an off-day and peeped into the store, she saw Taisho cleaning the altar alone. Even though Eva did not understand what was happening, she watched as Taisho touched and paid special respects to the shrine.

Near the outer wall where Eva lived, there was also an old, small shrine that enshrined the deity Aruvu.

The elderly in the vicinity of the neighbourhood would place bread and fruit there as offerings. Similarly, offerings were also placed on the altar in 'Nobu'.

There were high-quality and near transparent slices of salmon, similar to those that were served in the store. There were also fresh tree branches with thick and lush leaves, and a piece of fried bean curd.

Eva had not known what fried bean curd was until she came to 'Nobu'.

Since her mother also had not known what it was when asked, Eva assumed that it was food from Taisho and Shinobu's hometown.

There would always be a piece of it on the altar, without fail. Once, when they ran out of stock by mistake, Taisho flurriedly prepared something different.

Why was fried bean curd placed as an offering at the altar?

Eva, who had been concerned about this for a long time, asked Shinobu for the reason.

"Eva-chan, well that's because...God's messengers like fried bean curd the best."

Speaking of God's messengers, they would probably look something like the angels with wings that were depicted on the ceiling fresco of the church. It was somehow strangely interesting that fried bean curds were the favorite food of those solemn angels in the fresco.

Even though Deacon Edwin didn't seem to follow it much, the church had certain days when meat was not supposed to be eaten. It was funny to see the deacon run away to Nobu on those days.

Surely, the angels who didn't eat meat would find an alternative, such as fried bean curds.

Even angels would get tired of just eating bread, wine, and vegetables.

When Eva opened the sliding door, broom in hand, the spring breeze felt comfortable.

Even though it had felt like it was still winter a few days ago, spring had finally completely arrived. There were even times when she sweat under the hot sun.

Since Taisho had left to stock up on supplies and Shinobu had gone for a casual stroll, Eva was left alone in 'Nobu'.

Eva almost wanted to take a nap in this pleasant weather. She carefully swept and cleaned the store.

Eva diligently cleaned under the counter, the tables, and corners of the store, places that one might easily overlook. She believed that if the store was clean, one's spirit would also feel cleansed.

Even though the task of cleaning the store before it was opened was serious business, she enjoyed it as well.

Some rice balls that Taisho had prepared were on the counter.

Since they knew Eva did not have breakfast before coming here, Taisho had prepared it specifically for her.

Everyday, there were always three big rice balls that were prepared and wrapped in seaweed.

The fillings differed depending on the day, but all of them were delicious. Eva's favourites were the ones filled with salty-sweet stir fried beef and onions, as well as the baked cod roe. She also liked the ones with tuna and mayonnaise inside of them.

Even though Taisho was reluctant to make a seemingly blasphemous rice ball filled with tuna and mayonnaise, he still made them, since it was Shinobu's favourite.



Since Eva had finished sweeping, she was trying to take a chair down to wipe it when something white crossed her line of sight

“What’s that?”

What appeared in front of Eva, who was still holding a broom, was a little white fox.

The fried bean curd offering that had been placed on the altar was in its mouth. When the white fox glanced at Eva, its nose twitched and it ran away, towards the back door.

“Wait!”

That fried bean curd was something important to ‘Nobu’.

She did not know what would happen later if the offering was taken without the angels’ permission. Among the stories that she had heard in the church, there were many that talked about divine punishments that were brought upon those who had neglected their offerings to God.

“Please wait!”

Eva leaned the broom against the table and chased after the white fox.

The white fox went under the counter, past the refrigerator and ingredients, and through the back door.

Even though it was usually properly locked, Shinobu had opened it a little for ventilation.

Eva hesitated.

‘You absolutely must not go out through the back entrance.’ Taishou and Shinobu had repeated that many times. Even though they had not given a reason for it, it must have been because the back alley was not safe.

Although the Old Capital was a city that had many guards, there were still many areas that could be considered dangerous.

There could even be kidnappers who would abduct young, little girls like Eva.

‘Should I chase after it? Or not?’

‘It would be dangerous if I chase after it. If I am unfortunate, I might be caught by a kidnapper.’

‘But, what will happen if I do not chase after it? It would be a serious matter if the angels of God were craving fried bean curd all of a sudden. Won’t divine punishment fall upon Nobu?’

It would be extremely dangerous if Izakaya Nobu ended up facing the wrath of Heaven. It wasn’t difficult to realize which one was more unpleasant.

‘There isn’t any more time to hesitate.’

‘As I stand around, the fox will just keep on running. I have to catch up to it and get the fried bean curd back.’

Eva made up her mind and opened the door.

Smelly.

The first thing she experienced was a strong odor.

No, this wasn’t an unpleasant smell. It was just somewhat stifling.

Eva abruptly stopped when she saw a horseless carriage pass by at an unbelievable speed in front of her eyes.

The atmosphere of the place was quite different from that of the main street.

There were many hollowed out stone buildings that didn’t have any connection points or joints at all.

There was glass where windows would be on the houses, and the ground was made of neither gravel nor tiles. It was a plain grey road that seemed to continue on endlessly.

(TL: Wood houses have connection points like this.)

Was this really the back alley?

Eva suddenly felt uneasy, having been thrown into a completely different place or world, instead of the usual Old Capital.

However, this was not the time to be worried about such things.

She faintly caught sight of the fox's tail and started running after it.

Chapter 24

Side Story: Eva in Wonderland (Part 2)

She turned into a corner, crossed a bridge, and then turned into another corner. Even though she had lost sight of the fox quite some time ago, Eva still kept on running.

Even though she was feeling hungry, she had no choice but to keep moving forward.

That was the only way Eva could distract herself from the feeling of helplessness.

This place was not the Old Capital that she was familiar with.

She understood that when she exited Nobu and first caught sight of the big road. Similarly, she had seen a horseless carriage a little while ago, coming and going on the long, gray road.

From what little she had observed, the strange carriage somehow had a way to avoid running over people. There were places for people to cross the road, just like for crossing a river, and a pillar was set up there.

When the fire on the pillar turned green, the iron carriage did not move.

There were too many people in this town.

There were many more people than on the main streets of the Old Capital, and they passed by each other close enough to hit each other's shoulders. It was to the extent that one would think there was a festival going on, but it did not seem like that either.

This was possibly the daily routine of these people who were dressed in strange clothing.

While she was crossing the main road, she tripped and almost fell down several times.

Eva vaguely understood that it was unlikely to find the fox any longer. As she began to have thoughts like that, she had an even more frightening thought.

She didn't know the way back.

At first, she had made an effort to remember the direction, but all of the roads in this town looked identical to the confused Eva.

The buildings were the same colour, with similarly shaped corners. The roads were the same width, and the passersby looked the same too. Eva gradually became scared.

The words 'divine punishment' loomed over her in her mind.

The theft of the fried bean curd could cause God's angels to bring down judgement on 'Nobu' immediately.

If that was the case, then it would be impossible for Eva to return to the Old Capital forever.

Her parents and younger siblings, Shinobu, Taisho, and the customers of the store. It might not be possible to meet them again.

She would quietly starve to death without anyone noticing, in this stifling town where she didn't know her right from her left.

When she thought that, tears started flowing down her cheeks.

"Is there something wrong? Why are you crying?"

A pair of men suddenly called out to her.

Even though the people of this town did not wear hats, the two approaching her did.

Eva also noticed that they had a wooden stick on their waists, similar to the ones that Hans and Nikolaus always had. No one else was wearing one. Even Eva knew that, if you were hit with that stick, even a large adult would faint.

"Oh! Is it possible that you don't understand Japanese? Erm, *do you s~peak Ja-pan-ese?*"

(TL: guy here trying to speak English)

One of the men stooped down to talk with Eva, who became silent. The other person was talking into a small box that had strings attached to it.

Kidnappers!

Eva instantly understood. These men were trying to take Eva away. That small box that the man was talking into was most likely a tool that allowed him to call his fellow kidnappers.

"Are you not able to speak English? German? Oi, Gengoumaru, do you speak German?"

“No way. Shimoshikiryo should know. I’m a Mandarin expert, after all.”

“Even though the only Mandarin words I heard from you were ‘chi’, ‘pon’ and ‘pinfu’...”

(TL: these are mahjong terms in case you didn't get the joke)

“Rude. I can also say the numbers.”

“I bet you can only count up to ‘nine’ at most.”

While the two spoke to one another in a strange, secret code, Eva started to slowly back away.

‘If I am caught here, I will surely be sold away. If that happens, I will no longer be able to return to my dear home.’

Eva closed her eyes, bit her lips, and took a deep breath.

She focused all of her concentration to her front and dashed off like lightning.

“Ah! You! Wait a moment!”

Eva shook off the two people who tried to stop her and ran away.

In order to escape, she entered an alley, cut through the shrubbery, and crossed the main street when the green light on the pillar was blinking.

She ran, and ran, and ran, and ran.

By the time she noticed, she had climbed up a stone staircase and arrived in front of a small temple.

Her whole body was soaked in sweat and she felt exhausted. Her feet and knees were screaming in agony.

Eva sat down on the ground, under the shadow of the temple.

The leaves on the surrounding trees made a rustling sound in the wind.

It was hard to believe that such a quiet and peaceful place was connected to that town from a while ago.

Since there weren’t any fallen leaves on the ground, somebody must have been cleaning the place everyday.

Incidentally, Eva remembered that she had been halfway done cleaning Izakaya Nobu as well.

Even though she had already finished half of it, would Shinobu be able to finish cleaning the store before opening time, after finishing her walk?

Eva unintentionally burst out laughing while imagining Shinobu's flustered face. It probably wasn't the time to worry about whether the cleaning would be finished or not, since she might not be able to return home anymore.

From tomorrow, no, tonight onwards, she had to think of a way to survive through each night. Seeing as living in that stifling town was too harsh, Eva was thinking of finding a place to live nearby this temple.

Since the floor of the temple was elevated a bit, it was possible that she could endure the night by slipping underneath the floorboards. As for food, she might have to beg for it somewhere.

To be honest, it would be the best scenario if she could be employed by this temple.

Since it was a rather big place to clean, if Eva showed off her skills in cleaning, they might be kind enough to feed her.

Thinking that far ahead made her stomach grumble.

'If I knew that this would happen, I would've eaten the rice balls before chasing the fox.'

Fox. Fox. Fox.

When she suddenly looked up, there was a fox in front of the temple.

It wasn't the fox that Eva had chased. It was a fox statue, carved in stone. Two fox statues stood side by side, as if they were defending the temple.

She had lost her way because of a fox.

She felt a little bitter towards the fox when she thought about it, but when she stared at the fox statue, that feeling seemed to disappear.

"I wish this fox would take me back to 'Nobu'."

She laughed at herself for thinking something ridiculous.

She was tired and had reached her limits. After getting closer to the fox statue, she leaned against the pedestal to rest.

The cold stone felt like it was coursing through her body and sucking the heat away from her.

“Child. Oi~child.”

Eva slowly opened her eyes to see who was calling out to her. She seemed to have fallen asleep, but it still looked like the temple from before. It didn't seem like she was waking up from a bad dream after dozing off in Izakaya Nobu.

However, it also didn't seem like she had completely woken from the dream yet. She was looking at the face of the white fox that had stolen the fried bean curd.

“Child, you are someone who belongs to the opposite side. Why have you come here?”

“Because you took the fried bean curd meant for God's messengers.”

Eva protested as she rubbed her drowsy eyes. None of this would have happened if the white fox had not taken the fried bean curd.

“What strange things is this child saying? The God's messenger is me, you know. In other words, the fried bean curd was for me.”

“Then, why did you run away?”

The fox was at a loss for words at Eva's sharp question.

“Child, that is because you suddenly chased after me.”

“If you didn't run away, I wouldn't have chased after you! In the first place, aren't God's messengers angels with wings on their backs?”

“That is a messenger from a different God, you see. I am serving another God.”

“Hmmm...for some reason, that isn't very convincing.”

The dumbfounded fox shook its head, and its tail pounded the floor.

“Anyway, it’s a serious matter if a person from the opposite side strays into this world without permission. I will send you back with my divine power.”

“I, I can return?”

“That won’t be a problem. In any case, I share the blame for this as well.”

The fox made symbols with its forelegs and the scenery around Eva began to blur.

“Hmmm, can it be considered a success or a failure for Ukanomitama-sama to use her lifeforce to connect the tavern business between two worlds...those people should have paid more attention to this child.”

(TL: Ukanomitama is the deity of food and agriculture)

“If I see you next time, I won’t chase you!”

“That’s obvious. Ah, I have a message for those two people.”

“Message?”

“Yes. And I will only say this once. So listen carefully and remember it...”



“...-va! Eva!”

Eva slowly woke up as she was shaken by someone with big hands. In front of her were Taisho and Shinobu. Even Hans, Nikolaus, and Edwin were there.

“Erm, I...”

When she looked up while lying on her back, she saw the familiar ceiling of Izakaya Nobu.

“Eva-chan, I was so worried!”

As Eva gradually got up, Shinobu hugged her tightly. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

“Where did you go in the middle of cleaning? Did you know that the guards also split up and searched for you?”

“I thought you had been kidnapped, so I went to search for you around the neighbourhood.”

“But, Eva-chan, when did you come back, and why were you sleeping on the floor? I didn’t even notice you were here.”

“Anyway, no matter what, I’m glad you have returned.”

Taisho, Hans, Nikolaus, and Edwin looked relieved and they patted Eva. Eva tried to talk about what had happened on the other side, but she stopped. Even now, she thought everything that had happened was merely a dream, so if she spoke out now, no one would believe it.

However, there was one thing that was very important and had to be told no matter what.

“Taisho, I have a favour to ask.”

“What is it, Eva-chan? To ask a favour so suddenly, how strange.”

“Please make inari sushi as an offering to the shrine, at least once a month.”

(TL: There’s no food talk today, so I present this inari sushi as an offering to you readers. Thanks for your support!)



Chapter 25

The Dishonoured Kabayaki (Part 1)

A customer started to open the sliding door of Izakaya Nobu, but they closed it immediately.

There wasn't even enough time for the waitress, Shinobu, to say her usual greetings.

This had already been the fifth customer to do so. Lorentz glanced at the table in the back, which was the cause of all of this, and then shook his head.

There were three people sitting around the table while glaring at each other: a tough-looking bald man, a handsome and indifferent-looking man, and a beautiful, bored-looking woman with polished nails.

If any one of them had been sitting alone, anyone from the Old Capital would get up from their spot and run away.

These three people held tremendous power and influence in the city council; each of them was a Master of one of the Water Transportation Guilds in the Old Capital.

"Lorentz-san, why are you staring at those customers..."

Shinobu, who had been wiping the counter for a while now, turned around to reprove Lorentz, who was looking in that direction.

"Sorry, Shinobu-chan. My bad."

"It's troubling if you bow like that, you know."

Even though Shinobu said that, her words stung a little.

Ever since Lorentz had brought those three people over, Izakaya Nobu had not had any business. No customers would enter.

Even though the regular, Lorentz (Han's father), was there, that was it.

There were guests who stepped in carelessly and ordered a glass of ale and appetizers without noticing, but when they noticed who was there, they ended up finishing quickly and leaving.

Taisho was immersed in making salads for his meal, while the dishwasher, Eva, was busy practising her reading and writing. Since Shinobu was free, she picked a fight with Lorentz.

“In the first place, why do they need to hold the meeting of the Water Transportation Guilds here? There should be plenty of more suitable stores.”

“I also tried searching for other places, but they refused to go anywhere else.”

“They refused, huh?”

“Yes, they refused.”

In truth, ‘other places’ only meant stores that could serve the Water Transportation Guild Masters.

Lorentz wouldn’t recommend a place unless he had personally tried it. Since he had been here once before and it was recommended by Gernot, who was known to be the greatest gourmand in the city, he had brought those three here.

Those three people were very troublesome.

“That is why, no matter how many times I have said it, even though I know it’s useless, I can only apologise to you.”

The tough-looking baldy, Godhardt, brought his face closer to the handsome man, Reinhold, trying to intimidate him. They were close enough that their lips could touch.

It looked like a ruffian gang leader trying to blackmail a noble, and it even felt similar.

There were countless water transports travelling in every direction in the canals of the Old Capital, but they were all controlled by one of the three people gathered here right now.

“It is as I said, Godhardt-san. The things that need to be transferred will be transferred at the designated place. Why won’t you just accept the conditions of the deal that are already laid out in front of you already?”

“Reinhold-san, I have no intention of stirring up any trouble here as well. However, the conditions for the handover are too poor.”

Lorentz, who was the Glass Smith Guild's Master, was asked to arbitrate this exchange as an outsider, but from the looks of it, it would be impossible to actually barge in and break up their argument.

It would have been better if Eleonora, the other Water Transportation Guild Master, mediated in the exchange. However, due to certain circumstances, she was not allowed to do so.

There was nothing but shouts coming from those two people and an indifferent onlooker watching on, even though alcohol and dishes were set on the table.

The atmosphere inside the store was so overwhelming that it made the three employees by the counter feel restless. Even if they wanted to say something, they held back.

"Lorentz-san, what are those two people arguing about?"

"A subordinate of Reinhold-san was working in Godhardt's territory. It's been like that for quite some time."

"Ah, so that's why Godhardt-san is so angry."

Lorentz nodded while biting into the grilled bacon that was now being served to him.

Since the bacon from this store was as thick as a shoe sole, Lorentz loved eating it, even though he needed to bite harder to chew it.

When the juices from the fatty bacon and the mustard overflowed in his mouth, he drank his ale without stopping.

"Reinhold's guild is the oldest Water Transportation Guild in the Old Capital, and when the former Master suddenly passed away, Reinhold took over the guild's management like a hungry demon. It's been over a year now."

"So, it was due to a lack of experience, heh? Didn't the people around him assist him?"

"If that had happened, there wouldn't have been any troubles... Eleonora, that woman over there.

Her mother won over a lot of their executives from the inside, using her charms as a woman."

“Uwa, that’s scary.”

“Due to various other reasons, Reinhold’s subordinates had been suffering from misfortune. They reached a point where they had to search for other jobs elsewhere.”

While asking for his seventh refill of ale, Lorentz quietly peeped at the table at the back.

The argument was still going on like before, and there were no signs of any party giving in.

“So, if Reinhold-san apologised to Godhardt-san, wouldn’t that solve the problem?”

“If it were that easy, it would have already ended. Reinhold has nothing to compensate with, apart from his apology.”

There was a loud crashing sound, and when they turned back, they saw that a mug of ale had fallen onto the floor. Godhardt seemed to have hit the table with his fist.

“So, everyone has needs to have fishing rights, is that what you’re trying to say?”

“However, Godhardt-san, only my Guild has paid the imperial charter to acquire the fishing rights, correct?”

“I don’t give a damn about you and your imperial sanction! No one wants to pay the fishing rights for funa, catfish, or eel, Reinhold-san.”

(TL: Funa = Crucian carp)

“If the two of you don’t need it, shall I take it?”

“Can Eleonora-san be quiet for a moment?”

Godhardt gave warned Eleonora, who had tried to enter from the side.

Even though the largest Water Transportation Guild in the Old Capital was Godhardt’s, the one that had the most wealth and authority was Eleonora’s. Godhardt and Reinhold both did not want to let Eleonora profit any further.

That was why she had been called here.

“Now that you mention it, eel was being sold in the markets of the Old Capital.”

Taisho thought about Shinobu’s words.

“Yes, I saw it before. And it even looked so delicious.”

“Does eel taste good?”

Lorentz, who was surprised hearing the exchange between those two, almost spilled his ale.

“Isn’t eel delicious?”

“Which part of that imitation of a snake is good? You can only chop it into pieces and boil it, or make jellies out of it, if there’s no other choice.”

“I have not heard of it being eaten that way.”

There were plenty of eels in the canals of the Old Capital, but it wasn’t a popular food.

Not only did it have a slippery body, but its blood was poisonous to humans.

Lorentz, who had traveled to various places during his pilgrimage as a glass smith,

believed that the only ones who had ever eaten eel were the ones who had done it purely out of curiosity.

“Well, in any case, this argument isn’t going anywhere.”

“So, so, do you think eels are delicious or not?”

“Not this argument. I’m talking about Reinhold’s apology. I don’t think Guild Master Godhardt would like to be given fishing rights to catch unpalatable eels.”

“Eels are tasty!”

When she saw Shinobu pouting her cheeks in dissatisfaction, Eva shuddered a little and came forward to talk.

“I have not eaten delicious eel either.”

“Even if you say that, we did not stock up on eel because they’re expensive recently.”

When Taisho said that, Shinobu’s face suddenly lit up.

“Then, today’s meals will be themed on eel!”

“There might not be anymore left in our markets at this point in time, you know.”

Shinobu smiled widely and confidently headed towards the hesitant Taisho.

“It’ll be fine. There should still be some in this market.”



Those three people in the back, from left to right, are Eleonora, Reinhold and Godhardt.

Chapter 26

The Dishonoured Kabayaki (Part 2)

Shinobu went to the evening market and bought a bucket of eels.

Lorentz thought that they were going overboard for procuring on this much eel, but Shinobu fearlessly laughed at his words.

Even Taisho didn't seem to get angry. In fact, he loved eel.

However, there really was too much of it now. It would probably be made into jelly by next week, since there were more eels than people who could eat them.

"If Lorentz-san also feels like eating, please feel free to order, okay?"

"Hey, hey. Cut it out. I'm fine with grilled bacon. As long as I have this, I can drink as much ale as I want to."

He was already on his eighth glass.

Lorentz was no longer listening to the discussion happening at the back table.

There was no indication of it being settled anyway.

If the Water Transportation Guilds had intended to settle it at all, they could have called upon many other well-qualified mediators instead of Lorentz, who was just a travelling craftsmen.

Since they insisted on having Lorentz as the mediator, it could only be seen as them just wanting to argue without getting any results. If they wanted to, the City Council themselves could have mediated and made a decision for them.

Though, someone would have drawn the short end of the stick, and Reinhold would have had to borrow some money later.

On the other hand, Godhardt could have obtained the money anywhere, and Eleonora would have had to serve as the mediator.

Even though it could be said that this discussion was completely pointless, it was still necessary. After all the yelling, Godhardt, whose territory had been invaded, would be able to cheer up a little. This was the main reason for their meeting.

Lorentz understood the meaning behind this useless discussion and didn't mind the fact that he didn't have anything to do.

“Now, let’s get started.”

Taisho fired himself up and took an eel out of the bucket.

Taisho fixed the eel onto a slender, pointed drill and prepped it in the blink of an eye.

His hands moved very quickly.

It was something you would want to show to Holger the blacksmith.

“I think ‘*Edo-mae* style’ would be delicious with this eel.”

(*TL: Edo-mae: old Tokyo style*)

While he was saying something incomprehensible, he finished preparing one of the eels. Taisho immediately went on to the next step.

Since the eel had still been alive earlier, the best part of the entire process was seeing how Taisho skillfully turned a live eel into fillets.

“Hey, Shinobu-chan. Is it safe...slicing it open like that? I can only remember them being chopped into chunks and being boiled or made into jellies.”

“I don’t know about those methods, but eels are sliced open and eaten like that. Slicing the belly is the Kansai-style, while slicing the back is the ‘*Edo-mae*’ style.”

“Even though I don’t understand what an ‘*Edo-mae* style’ is, there must be many different styles. Did Shinobu eat eel in your hometown often?”

“Yup. I ate so much that they nearly went extinct, probably.”

Taisho had emptied the contents of the bucket, and was now skewering the eels, which was then placed into a pot with lots of steam rising from it.

She probably was not a person that came from the Empire if she had eaten so much eel, since the country’s river still held an abundance of eel.

Taisho had emptied the contents of the bucket and was now skewering the eels, which were then placed into a pot that had clouds of steam rising from it.

“The heck? I thought it was a strange way of preparing it, but it ended up being boiled after all.”

“This isn’t boiling, you know. It’s steaming.”

As he watched Shinobu set up bowls and waited impatiently, Lorentz gradually became interested in the eel dish.

Even though it was decided that he would only have the bacon and the ale, he now wanted to try the eel at Nobu's, if possible. It was such a mysterious feeling.

Taisho slathered some sauce on the steamed eel and momentarily placed it over the fire.

It made a crackling sound, and a unique, salty-sweet fragrance tickled Lorentz's nose, over by the counter.

"Do you grill the eel too, Shinobu-chan?"

"There are other cooking methods, but generally, you grill it."

"Ahh. Since it was steamed earlier, the fire can penetrate it, I think."

"When you steam and then grill it, the meat will become extremely tender. I like it better than the Kansai style, where it's just grilled. It's also very easy to eat, since the bones are removed."

As Shinobu had said, the eels that Lorentz had eaten when he travelled around the Empire had many bones inside of them and were difficult to eat.

At Nobu, Taisho had removed the bones from the eel, so it was probably easier to eat.

As Taisho fanned the flames below the eel, the quarreling that had been going on in the back suddenly stopped.

The nice smell had probably reached the back table by now. Lorentz could even hear the sounds of the trio swallowing their saliva.

"What is he grilling that for...?"

"Sorry, that is for our meals, since all of you don't seem to be eating or drinking much."

Shinobu coldly answered Reinhold's question.

It was something that his youngest son, Hans, had told him, but it seemed that the waitress of this store had a tendency to treat customers coldly if they didn't eat anything.

“If the customer does not order, that’s because the dishes of this store are terrible,’ huh...now, if the customer is made to sit while smelling this fragrant smell without getting anything, won’t they get irritated? It doesn’t matter if it’s your meals, just bring it out for me.”

At Godhardt’s words, Shinobu seemed to have had an idea.

“I understand. Since it’ll be impolite to serve our meals as dishes, we will serve this free of charge.”

“Free of charge? What are you planning?”

“Don’t worry, Eleonora-san. I am not planning anything. However, it will only be free of charge if you can name the ingredient that was being cooked. Each person is limited to one answer.”

All three of them seemed to have taken interest in the words ‘free of charge’. Just the smell itself was already amazing. They would probably do anything now just to eat it.

Eleonora took the lead.

“This smell...is it lamb? Did you pour sauce over a fillet of young lamb and grill it?”

“Regrettably, that was far from correct.”

The next one was Godhardt, who raised his hands confidently.

“Eleonora must not have realized that it isn’t lamb. Instead, it’s probably a type of fish. It must’ve been obtained from the Northern Port, through a canal. Since the flavours of a salmon would clash with the sauce, maybe it’s the common cod fish?”

“Godhardt-san is also wrong.”

The remaining Reinhold did not answer recklessly. He looked at the ceiling for a while, and racked his brain.

However, since he couldn’t find an answer, his reply was also merely a guess.

“I’m not like these two gourmands, so I won’t be embarrassed by my guess. It is somewhat refreshing to not be bothered by it, but I would be happy if it’s eel.”

The two people laughed at Reinhold’s answer.

“It’s impossible for an eel to be made into a dish that smells this good.”

“It’s as Eleonora said, Reinhold. If this dish is really made out of eel and it actually tastes delicious, then I will apologise and even accept the imperial charter politely, okay.”

“Are you serious Godhardt? To make a promise like that?”

“Even if it turns out to be a different ingredient, it absolutely won’t be eel, so it’s perfectly fine.”

While the two people were ridiculing Reinhold, Shinobu replied with a big smile on her face.

“That’s correct! It’s eel!”

“What?!”

“Lies!”

“I did it!”

While enjoying the three people’s different reactions, Shinobu placed the grilled *kabayaki* on a plate and served it to the table. Of course, there was one for Lorentz too.



“This is...eel?”

Lorentz ignored the joy and bitterness coming from the table and paid closer attention to the hot, steaming plate in front of him. Since Lorentz was still unable to use chopsticks, a wooden knife and a wooden fork were prepared for him.

“It smells good but...how about its taste?”

When he tossed a slice of the tender meat into his mouth, Lorentz’s eyes widened. The sweet and salty sauce was thick, but it wasn’t unpleasant. The meat’s soft, fluffy texture seemed to melt away on his tongue.

It was completely different from the muddy, bony eel that he had previously had. However, Lorentz had seen the whole cooking process from the very beginning, when it was still in the bucket. No matter what anyone else said, it was still an eel.

Even the noisy bunch at the back table went silent.

No matter how much they declared themselves to be gourmands, it was definitely not something that they had eaten before. Someone should have brought Gernot here for this.

As for Shinobu, she was stuffing her mouth with eel and a bowl of rice together with Eva. It was amusing to see that a grain of rice had become stuck to her cheek.

“Excuse me, Taisho, but this eel here...”

“One for this table here!”

“That’s not fair, Godhardt! I want a portion too!”

“I’ll have one plate as well!”

‘Yes, yes.’ Taisho smiled and started to grill the next set of eels.

The smell drifted through the store, together with the crackling noises, and Lorentz’s ale-filled stomach rumbled. If this eel was eaten as a side dish, would ale or sake be better?

“So, Lorentz-san, was buying a full bucket of eels the right choice?”

Lorentz was only able to return a bitter smile to Shinobu, who was smiling triumphantly.

Once the discussion was finished, the three Guild Masters of the Water Transportation Guilds left. Only Lorentz remained in the store, enjoying his sake. He was having *shirayaki* as his snack, together with his sake. When he applied a little bit of wasabi on it, it became even more delicious.

Even though he wanted to order more ale, if it was this kind of taste, sake was a better choice.

(TL: shirayaki: plain grilled eel without sauce)



“In the end, who will gain the profits?”

Lorentz muttered to himself and organised his thoughts.

Godhardt, who had obtained the fishing rights to eels, would certainly profit. If the cooking method for eel were to spread, the water rights, which had no value up till now, would become important.

However, would such a cooking method spread so easily? Explaining it to their subordinates would be difficult too. There would only be hardships ahead.

Eleonora, who had mediated for those two, had gained prestige.

Even though she was wealthy, she was treated poorly because she was a woman. In that sense, it could be said that she had gained a considerable amount of ‘profit’.

Concerning Reinhold, it was difficult to say.

In a way, it was profitable, since the original intention was to hand over the water rights to Godhardt, and he succeeded in sealing the deal.

However, if he had held onto the water rights to the eel, he would have eventually made a killing with it. It could only be said that a new source of income had been taken from under his feet.

Even though he succeeded in holding it in today, there was no way to predict the future.

However, there was one person who had definitely profited.

Taisho, who was performing maintenance on his kitchen knife in front of Lorentz, would be able to profit by selling *kabayaki* from now on.

It was said that people looked happiest when they were eating delicious food, but in reality, this guy was probably the happiest of them all.

While having such thoughts, Lorentz drained his cup of sake.

Chapter 27

The Commander's Triumphant Return (Part 1)

Three carriages passed through the main gates of the Old Capital.

White flowers decorated the horses and the carriages, symbolizing the union of a newlywed couple.

The newlywed's carriage was given the privilege of being the first to pass through the gates of the Old Capital for that day. This was such a high privilege that even nobles and priests couldn't pass through the gates first.

Furthermore, as part of the newlywed's many privileges, there were many inns that would accommodate them, lined up in rows, in front of the gates of the Old Capital.

The procession proudly advanced forward on this jovial morning, with open top carriages bearing household belongings in tow. The horses also had good physiques, hinting that they must have cost a pretty penny.

If it were an ordinary newlywed couple, only one carriage would have been sufficient. There were whispers among the onlooking passersby, saying that the groom must have fallen head over heels for his bride to have provided three carriages.

Under these circumstances, Berthold, who was on the carriage, held his head up high.

Many people came out of their houses to receive and congratulate Berthold, the Demon Commander of the Old Capital's Sentry Corps.

He triumphantly returned to the Old Capital with his new wife, Helmina, who was from the port city.

Their new house had already been decided too, and thus their happy life as newlyweds had begun.

"So then...why are the newlyweds here so early, at this bar?"

The next day, after returning to the Old Capital, Berthold brought his newly wedded wife, Helmina, to Izakaya Nobu.

Shinobu's eyes were not smiling as she served tea to the recently-married couple.

These two people had come to greet and have their marriage blessed by Taisho, Shinobu, and even Eva at an ungodly hour in the morning.

Likewise, the three of them congratulated the couple. As time passed on however, Berthold began to sense that the atmosphere had become awkward, since the two of them had not shown any signs of leaving.

Eva was also a bit irritated. Ever since the store became very busy, she could only leave early in the mornings. Berthold had also realized that Izakaya Nobu had become incredibly busy in the past few days.

However, there were reasons why Berthold couldn't return home.

"Erm actually, Shinobu-chan, it's hard to say."

"What is it, Berthold-san? Very few things can surprise me."

"To be honest, I'd like you to let my wife stay here, in this store, for a while."

"Eh?"

Helmina, who was sitting beside Berthold, blushed and nodded nervously.

Helmina, who was slightly older than Eva, was a quiet girl with beige hair, and did not seem to be the self-assertive type.

"Frankly, my wife's family are known as the best squid fishers in the port city located in the north."

"Yes, I have heard about that before."

"Well, her father was a little too doting. Since he deemed that it was necessary for us newlyweds to have a fully furnished, splendid house, he made arrangements for it"

"That sounds like a good father-in-law, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I also think that he's a very good father-in-law. Preparing three carriages filled with household items isn't something easy to pull off. However, there is a major problem."

"Problem?"

“Our house has already been decided, but since the previous residents have not completely moved out yet, we can’t move in.”

Having problems when moving into a new home had always been a common story.

The residents were intending to move to a distant place, but it seemed that the monk from before had wanted to return to the Eastern Kingdom urgently and had rented their reserved carriage at an exorbitant price.

Since he had been considerably panicked, it seemed that there were a lot of circumstances surrounding it.

“That’s bad.”

“Furthermore, the previous official residence that I had stayed at as the Corps’ Commander was not very spacious, since it was only meant for a single person.”

“Somehow...I can tell where this story is leading to.”

“The carriages that had carried the household furniture have already returned to the northern port city. It was rented from the *Bashaku* guild. Since it wasn’t good for the furniture to be exposed to the weather, three whole carriages worth of furniture were brought to my official residence. As a result, it became very crowded...”

(TL: Bashaku were Japanese teamsters who transports goods with horses in the Heian Era and Sengoku Period)

“So, there is no place for Helmina-san to stay during the day?”

“That is correct.”

Even Berthold himself, who personally explained everything, seemed dumbfounded by the turn of events.

He was not able to prepare a satisfactory house to receive his wife, whom he had fallen in love with. Even if he did try to forcibly cram everything together in order to make enough space for one more person, it still would not work.

“We had decided to rent a room in the inn at night. The discussion about setting the deadline for the residents to vacate the premises is ongoing and we are

reaching an agreement. After that, the only problem left is where Helmina can stay during the day.”

“So you came here.”

“It is best if she is able to accompany me, but unfortunately, I can’t afford to do that. As expected, Hans, Nikolaus, and everyone else have slacked off while I wasn’t around. I cannot help training them just a little bit more strictly.”

Today, Berthold’s unit had immediately been ordered to run outside, along the walls of the Old Capital.

Rather than calling it compensation for being lazy, he was intending to correct their discipline in a short period of time.

The rumors of plans for the independence of the northern territories had also been circulating around in the port city. Berthold had a duty of preparing them for the possibility that the Old Capital would become involved in these kind of things.

“Taisho, what do we do?”

“I don’t mind it, but is your wife alright with it?”

Helmina, who was called out by Taisho, nodded panickedly. Apparently, she had taken interest in the ship figurine that was displayed in the store.

A model of an entire sailing ship was inside a slightly bigger bottle, and she wondered how it had been made. Izakaya Nobu had many strange decorations.

“Y-Yes. Please treat me well! I can only help out with simple things though.”

Taisho looked up from his chopping board and towards Helmina, who stood up and bowed while saying that.

“Help? Berthold-san, may I ask your wife to lend a helping hand?”

“Of course. I didn’t intend to receive your help for free. I have also properly discussed this with Helmina. Actually, we were worried whether Nobu needed a helper or not...”

“You don’t have to be worried about that. I would even borrow a cat’s paws right now.”

Shinobu and Eva also eagerly nodded, as if attracted to Taisho’s proposal. It seemed that they were greatly understaffed.

“It seemed like this place was really busy, considering the fact that Eva can only leave early in the morning. What on earth happened here at ‘Nobu’?”

Taisho let out a big sigh at Berthold’s question.

“It’s the eel...”

Taisho lifted the eel he had been handling from the chopping board. It might have still been alive, since the tail was moving.

As expected of a fisherman’s daughter, Helmina did not flinch at all when she saw it.

“What does eel have to do with this? Will you put up jelly or something like that on the store’s menu?”

“Well, it is faster to explain by eating than through words.”

As he said so, Taisho took out something that had been sliced and grilled.

The fragrance of the thick *tare*-like sauce, with a color between amber and light brown, stimulated their appetite.

Berthold, who had imagined wobbling jelly dishes, was a little surprised when he was told this was an eel.

(*TL: tare = dipping sauce*)

There was also something similar to *dashimaki tamago*, which was a standard item on Nobu’s menu, placed on another plate. In this case, there seemed to be eel rolled in it.

The same dishes were also placed in front of Helmina.

(*TL: dashimaki tamago aka tamagoyaki = japanese rolled up omelette*)

“May I eat it?”

After excusing herself, Helmina used the wooden spoon.

The moment she held it in her mouth, her usually small eyes opened wide.

“Be-Berthold-san!”

“Wha-what is it, Helmina?”

“This is amazing! This eel is delicious!”

As if to assert its deliciousness, Helmina was flapping her free hand. For some reason, she seemed like a dog.

“This *dashimaki tamago* also looks tasty.”

“This is *umaki*. Since eel was rolled in it, it’s called *umaki*”



“I see.”

Berthold used the wooden spoon to cut it in half and brought a piece to his mouth.

It was fluffy and creamy. A sense of happiness spread in his mouth. It certainly was delicious. Rather, it was beyond delicious.

“I see... if it’s this, then it is to be expected that Nobu would become busier.”

“Even Berthold-san thinks so?”

“That’s right. If it was me, I would also want to eat this again and again.”

It was most likely that it was difficult to imitate this taste elsewhere.

Eels were swimming in swarms in the canals. Even if it was sold cheaply, it would still end up getting discarded. However, the taste of the sauce and method of grilling was one-of-a-kind, and could only be found at Nobu.

“Nowadays, when we open the store at night, the customers are only here for the eel.”

Taisho nodded at Shinobu, who was muttering to herself.

“Thanks to this store, I can see how the stores selling eels always run out of stock.”

“Isn’t it a good thing to be that prosperous?”

“Even if you say that, there are customers who come just to drink, too. There is a need to prepare more appetizers than ever since business doubled. If we weren’t able to serve all of the prepared appetizers to the customers who came, it would be a waste.”

There were also problems with prosperity in various other ways. Certainly, to Berthold, who was a military person, if more customers came, then the store would profit more. However, that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Most of all, the customers who took the trouble to come to the store in order to drink can’t even enter the store anymore.”

“Nobu isn’t very spacious, you know.”

Shinobu and Eva were also sighing.

There was nothing that could be done when the number of customers was limited to the six seats by the counter and two tables.

They certainly were in need of helping hands.

While he thought about it, he looked at Helmina, who was savouring the umaki with loose cheeks and was smiling absentmindedly.

“Helmina, since this is the case, please help them out here.”

“Eh? Oh. Yes.”

Regardless of whether she had been listening, Helmina nodded while holding the wooden spoon in her mouth.

“I have...gotten an idea.”

Chapter 28

The Commander's Triumphant Return (Part 2)

“You thought of a bento, huh...” (*TL: bento = lunch boxes*)

In front of Berthold's eyes, the eel bentos were selling one after the other. The eel bento that Helmina had thought of was successful from the very beginning. The queue of people lining up in front of Nobu stretched all the way to the next block.

Helmina and Eva were the attendants serving at the sales stand that was set up in front of the store. Shinobu had selected the uniforms for them. It was an adorable costume that used white as the main color, which suited the two young ladies really well.

The bento's contents consisted of rice, eel with sauce on top, and umaki on the sides. There were also pickles mixed in it.

In addition, the secret to its popularity was due to the included wooden spoon, which made eating it much easier.

By using Han's father's network, they managed to enlist the help of the Woodworking Guild to manufacture the wooden lunch boxes at a reasonable price. Many apprentices had joined since spring arrived, so they had accepted the offer willingly, as it would serve as good practice material for them.

Even though there were occasionally lunch boxes with strange shapes mixed in, the customers did not mind.

It was Shinobu's idea to set the price a little bit higher at noon during lunch hours. It was necessary to set a price when selling famous products like these, since there was a limit as to how many could be produced in a day.

The eel bento became an instant topic of gossip in town.

Godhardt and Eleonora from the Water Transportation Guild and Councilman Gernot made good use of their subordinates to buy them. This made its popularity soar even higher.

The people knew that this food was something the gourmands would also eat. Even if they had to empty their pockets, the people of the Old Capital definitely wanted to try it.

Since Gernot could finish three servings by himself, he made his subordinates queue up before the sales even started, in order to buy the bentos before they got cold.

Even if there were stores that tried to copy them, they were helpless when it came to making the sauce.

They couldn't do anything with the eels they had in stock either. It was said that they ended up putting up a sale and went around selling jellies. Obviously, their reception wasn't that good.

Even though Izakaya Nobu was flourishing, they would never serve eel at night. Naturally, there was criticism from the customers. However, since it would not be served, no matter how long they persisted, they had no choice but to back down in the end.

Even though they expected trouble for a while, it could be eaten during the day, so the situation unexpectedly calmed down after a few days.

"Eva-chan, is my Helmina working properly?"

"Yes. Helmina-san is also good at calculating money. She's amazing, you know!"

Helmina blushed a little as she handed change to a customer.

Although they had been worried about whether the quiet Helmina would be able to serve the customers, it seemed that it was just a needless worry.

The husband, Berthold, didn't approve of it very much, but there were some customers who came to buy a bento just to see Helmina.

There seemed to be indications that the moving issue would be resolved in a few days, but it was Helmina's wish to continue working in Nobu until the eel uproar had settled down. Of course, Berthold was in favour of that too.

Even though he preferred for her to stay at home, he wanted to let Helmina decide for herself.

"Here's one eel bento. Thank you very much!"

Eva, who cheerfully handed over the bento, also looked lively.

Taisho and Shinobu were inside the store preparing the eel bento, which would then be followed by the preparation work for the coming night.

“Here you go, Berthold-san.”

Helmina took the chance and handed over a bento to Berthold before serving the next customer.

That wasn't an eel bento, but a handmade bento made by a wife instead, filled with love and care. As a girl from a fishing village, Helmina was good at cooking as well.

When she came to work at Nobu, she had borrowed a corner of the kitchen to prepare a bento for Berthold's lunch. It seemed that Taisho had taught her various dishes too.

“Thanks, Helmina. I might be able to return a little bit early today.”

“That's good. Then, I'll wait for Berthold-san here. Let's eat something before returning to the inn.”

“Yeah, let's do that.”

After they made the plans, he was all fired up for the rest of his afternoon work. The training of the subordinates, who had slacked off during Berthold's absence, was progressing smoothly, with a bit of time to spare.

There were strange activities coming from the northern territories, where they had started hiring mercenaries and purchasing more food. However, that was something out of Berthold's control for now.

As long as the Old Capital wasn't attacked, it was not the Sentry Corps' business. Anyhow, all he wanted now was to have a meal.

The glass sliding door opened, even though the store had not opened yet.

For these past few days, eating the bento here while listening to his wife work as an attendant outside was an absolute pleasure to Berthold.

After a hurried greeting from Taisho and Shinobu, he chose a seat at the front table. This too, was a small form of luxury.

He then carefully opened the lid of the bento with both hands.

“Oh? What's this?”

There was only rice in it.

Even though the eel sauce was poured over it, the vital part, the eel, wasn't present.

"What the heck is going on?"

Chuckles resounded out from Taisho and Shinobu, who were behind the counter, while he held the spoon, at a loss for words.

Apparently, both of them seemed to have known about the contents of the bento.

"Hey, what is so funny? Having just married and only receiving a bento with rice and sauce...this is a couple's crisis!"

"No, please try it out a little first, Berthold-san."

He plunged the wooden spoon into the rice at Taisho's suggestion. Although he had thought that there was only rice inside, he felt an unexpected resistance. When he moved the rice to the side, while taking care not to destroy it, a little deformed eel appeared in the center.

"The eel is inside?"

"It's called *mamushi*. It seems that during the olden days, they steamed the rice together with the eel in the centre. Doesn't it look stylish?"

(TL: mamushi = viper. But in this context, it's a way of steaming the eel in the centre of the rice.)

"If that's the case, you should have told me early on, damn it."

Berthold held the wooden spoon while cursing.

The fragrance from the delicious eel stimulated his appetite, to the extent that his stomach was aching in hunger.

The taste of the sauce had permeated into the boiled rice seamlessly. The hidden eel was so soft that it crumbled on its own.

"Delicious. As expected, Taisho is the only one who can grill this."

"It is impolite to Helmina-san if you say such things."

Shinobu interjected while preparing a dish.

“Eh, is this eel grilled by Helmina too?”

“Well, the truth is, I grilled most of it. But have no doubt, Helmina-san helped out too.”

“I’ll take whatever my wife makes.”

As he ate the *mamushi* bento, he gradually understood why the eel wasn’t placed on top. It was because of its deformed shape.

Even though Taisho said something like that, perhaps Helmina had tried grilling it before asking Taisho for help.

After all, the eel did end up being deformed. Nonetheless, it was still delicious, even though she had been helped.

When he thought about it, every mouthful of that ordinary bento became precious and was filled with love.

“Tasty. I am fortunate to be able to eat such delicious bento.”

“Please tell those words to the person who made it yourself.”

Shinobu teased him while bringing out a wooden bowl with steam rising out from it.

“This is *shijimi* in red miso soup. This was also made by Helmina and me.”
(*TL: shijimi: clams*)

“Eh? Thanks for letting me drink soup in the afternoon.”

Speaking of the usual bento in the Old Capital, it was normally made out of bread and cheese.

Since it was like that, it was natural for Nobu’s eel bento to stand-out.

He brought the bowl to his mouth and took a sip.

The hot soup flowed from his mouth to his throat, then to his stomach. He appreciated the strong seasoning of the soup, considering how much he had sweat during the morning training.

He alternated between eating the *mamushi* bento and drinking the soup.

Even though he was sweating a lot from it, somehow it wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

He let out a big, satisfied sigh after cleanly finishing every single grain of rice. It was a form of happiness he couldn't have imagined during his mercenary days.

A lovely bride, good subordinates, and delicious rice and alcohol.

He wished this day would continue forever, while he refused to deal with anything troublesome.

While he thought about such things, his old wound suddenly hurt.

His self-conceit was the cause of his old injury. He would be useless if he became careless in the battlefield.

Despite that, he still wanted to enjoy this bit of happiness, for just a little while longer.

Chapter 29

The Secret of “Toriaezu Nama” (Part 1)

It had been raining since morning that day.

It was a heavy rain. Shinobu and Nobuyuki's store, which was linked to the Old Capital, was one of the places affected.

The rain, which had been falling since morning, gradually brought along a wind that shook the glass door.

Since it had nearly become a storm before noon, they decided to stop selling the eel bento for the day.

“The weather was still fine before we began cooking the rice.”

Recently, Eva, who had begun to learn simple calculations from Deacon Edwin, had also begun to take an interest in inventory management.

This was because she had gotten angry at Nobuyuki, who always overstocked on ingredients. Her contribution to the store became quite large. Even Shinobu, who had never worried about Nobuyuki, couldn't tell Eva that her chances to go out shopping because of his mistakes had decreased, since it would be awkward.

“Since we stopped selling it, today's meal will be eel.”

“Really? Then, I want to eat *hitsumabushi*!”

(TL: *hitsumabushi* = *una-don*)

Helmina, who had gradually gotten used to the shop, had recently taken a liking to *hitsumabushi*.

Hitsumabushi was a style where each bowl of eel rice was served and then eaten in three to four steps.

However, they couldn't use the wooden containers for employee meals, since they were for customers, so Helmina just poured the broth directly into the bowl and ate it. She had even mastered using chopsticks in no time, and her eating technique was excellent.

“Helmina-san, didn't you just eat *hitsumabushi* yesterday too?”

“If possible, I'd like to eat *hitsumabushi* everyday!!”

Even though Helmina would only stay at the inn for a few more days, she expressed her desire to continue coming here even after moving into her new house.

Shinobu and Nobuyuki wouldn't be able to run the shop without Helmina's help until the popularity of eel dropped, so they felt relieved.

As the sun set and the torrential rain continued outside the glass door, there seemed to be no signs of the usual business taking place. Occasionally, Eva had tried to peek outside through the door gap, but she couldn't help but close it immediately because of the rain.

Even so, there still might have been some eccentric customers who would come in this weather.

Just in case, the open sign was put out, but the store remained quite.

Once they finished eating their meals, they passed the time aimlessly.

"Taisho, what are your thoughts on this?!"

Shinobu, who was leaning limply in a chair, asked that. Nobuyuki, who was sharpening his knife, just replied [Slow business] in a tired voice.

Certainly, there weren't many customers, but the words "Slow business" were wrong.

When the door had first connected to the Old Capital, business had been even slower. Shinobu remembered joking about how the store was where cuckoos gathered in large numbers.

"It's not that, you know. It's a different phrase."

"I don't understand."

Eva, who had started dozing off on the table, and Helmina, who was keenly observing the bottle ship, would not be useful in this matter. She tried to remember the right phrase from the original world.

"Ah, I see. 'The calm before the storm'."

"The storm is already here, you know."

Shinobu puffed her cheeks at Nobuyuki's tasteless retort.

Such a thing was clearly understandable. However, her memory was a little fuzzy. It was something hard to grasp. While Shinobu was considering wasting her time by imagining things that could happen, she heard the sound of a carriage stopping outside.

“A carriage...?”

Eva looked up while rubbing her sleepy eyes.

Shinobu looked at Nobuyuki and, in a panic, rushed to receive the customer.

On the other hand, Helmina seemed more mature, as expected of a fisherman's daughter, and prepared a soft bath towel without being prompted.

The glass door was forcefully pulled open. At that moment, the heavy rain that was being blown sideways also entered the store.

“Welcome!”

“...’elcome.”

While they gave their usual greeting, the glass door was violently slammed shut. The two guests who came in were dripping wet.

When Helmina immediately passed the towel to them, the larger sized guest received it with a composed gesture.

Even though he had a “large build”, it wasn't all fat.

He was wrapped in luxurious clothes, which made him look like a thin, weak scarecrow.

The other person was shorter by comparison, and had a moustache on his thin face.

This moustache was certainly familiar. That too, was an unpleasant memory.

“Still a small, dirty store as usual.”

Shinobu endured the low level insult hurled by the smiling small, moustached man.

“Welcome back to this store. Did you enjoy the sandwiches?”

The man shrugged his stout neck, showing his displeasure at her question.

“Because of that incident, I was fired from Baron Branton’s household. I would never want to eat that again, since it annoys me whenever I think about it.”

“I am very sorry for my impropriety just now.”

That being said, the man standing behind him seemed like a different person from Baron Branton.

Even though there were some parts of Branton that were unpleasant, this customer was giving off an even more unpleasant atmosphere.

He didn’t seem like a noble, but when she saw that all ten of his fingers had glittering rings on them, she thought he could be a merchant.

Shinobu was brought up as a daughter in a traditional Japanese restaurant, so she had confidence in her ability to judge people.

Even though she had mistaken a man for a woman before, she had never missed her mark on other occasions while on her job.

(TL: She grew up in a ryoutei.)

The two people ordered draft beer while being served appetizers.

What was served to them was certainly draft beers. However, the two people drank in a strange manner.

They drank the beer with an air of importance, like a sommelier sampling a glass of wine.

Had they drunk it that wary first because they thought that the beer would taste bad?

Especially the thin man, who looked as if he wanted to check the taste before emptying the beer mug.

“I heard that this bar has an interesting way of cooking eel.”

They wanted eel.

Even though he dressed like a young person, when they looked closer, he seemed to be in his late forties or early fifties.

“Bachschouf-sama wishes to eat eel. Bring it out quickly.”

This small man’s threatening speech sounded familiar to Shinobu.

If she was not mistaken, Bachschouf was the current chairman of the City Council.

Chairmen were selected in rotation, but someone had told her about Bachschouf being the chief of the wealthiest company in the Old Capital.

Shinobu gave a brief wink towards Nobuyuki.

Nobuyuki's eyes were smiling, as if he were enjoying it.

"I am terribly sorry, but we only sell eel for lunch in our store."

Shinobu bowed, as if to show her sincerest apologies.

There was eel. The rice was also already cooked.

A troublesome customer had appeared despite this rain, and they wanted to eat eel.

However, Shinobu was going to refuse this one time.

The other party was said to have the highest authority in this city.

However, everyone was equal in the store.

For this reason, she turned them down this once, in the hopes of compromising with the customer to allow him to save face. That was what she intended to do.

"Well then, I'll buy this store."

When Bachscouf said that, the small moustached man took out a leather sack from his chest area and threw it onto the table. It held silver coins, but the amount was huge.

"What is the meaning of this?"

When Shinobu asked that, trying keep up her smile, Bachschouf leaked out a low laugh and creased his brows.

"Rumours about this store have circulated among the city councilmen. I was brought up in the capital of the Empire, so the food of the Old Capital does not suit my taste. Hence, I thought it would be interesting to buy one or two stores like this one."

"I still don't really understand what you mean..."

Bachschouf opened one eye wide, pretending to be very surprised at Shinobu's words.

"I said, I will buy this store."

Shinobu did not understand what this man was saying at all.

Suddenly appearing in order to buy this store. Would anyone accept such an absurd situation?

"I do not know which foreign country you are from, but to open a shop in the Old Capital without a backer will be difficult, don't you think so? This means that my company will support you."

Bachschouf was completely looking down on Shinobu and Nobuyuki.

Rather than looking down, it was more like he did not even see them as human beings.

"Of course, since we can't have a bar as part of the company's possessions, Damien-kun, here will be the acting storekeeper."

"It is impossible to continue this talk any further."

Shinobu declared with a strong tone.

No matter how much money was offered, this talk would not be continued any further.

The small man called Damien smirked and glared at Shinobu.

"Miss, it is good to have a strong will...but you should be aware of the other party. Bachschouf-sama is the most powerful man in this Old Capital. When he says he will buy every store, he will. Do not be foolish."

"Every store?"

"Yes. We will even properly hire you guys, you know. That's obvious. What we want is the chef of this store, and smashing down this crumbling store also seems like a good idea."

"What kind of selfish nonsense are you spouting?!"

Bachscouf stared at Shinobu, who had raised her voice, while licking his lips. He put on a different expression.

“Such an energetic young lady. I had to send my mistress back to her family, since she got too old...how about it, if it’s alright with you?”

“Wha...”

Shinobu became speechless after hearing words ruder than she could have imagined.

“Can you stop saying strange things to my employee?”

Nobuyuki threatened with a growling voice while sharpening the kitchen knife in his hands, but the master and servant duo did not seem to be concerned by it at all.

“Well, I prefer a quiet girl for myself too. How about it, missy with beige hair?”

When she was called out by him, Helmina’s body started trembling. Eva spread her arms wide open and stood in front of Helmina, as if to protect her.

“Helmina-chan is a newlywed. She will not become your mistress!”

“Newlywed? That sounds like a fine idea. Marriage is only a formality, anyway.”

Helmina feebly shook her head at Bachschouf, who raised one corner of his mouth, smiling.

“I’m getting more and more excited. Now, if you hand over the missy over there, we will keep quiet about that matter.”

“That matter...?”

Damien forced his way through when Nobuyuki was coming out from behind the counter while carrying his kitchen knife.

“It’s this. This.”

He thrust out the ordinary looking beer mug, which had been filled with draft beer just a short time ago.

“Is there anything wrong with the beer mug?”

“The mug is irrelevant. The issue is with its contents.”

Bachscouf continued talking after draining the remaining foam at the bottom of the mug.

“You say this is ale, and seem to be selling it. But I’m positive this is ‘Toriaezu Nama’, isn’t it?”

“Is there a problem with it?”

“It’s a huge problem. Because this is not ale.”

“It’s not ale?”

Shinobu drew her knowledge about beer from deep within her mind. Ale was beer, though. Certainly, the beer that circulated in Japan today was not ale.

“Yes, this is lager. Without a doubt.”

Bachshouf declared triumphantly.

Shinobu and Nobuyuki didn’t know what to say, so they remained silent.

Certainly, the beer which was served at ‘Nobu’ was lager. However, the residents of the Old Capital called beer, ale. Therefore, it hadn’t been a cause of concern so far.

The heavy rain was still continuing to fall outside the store, and only the pattering sound of the rain filled the store.

“What do you mean?”

When Shinobu made up her mind and asked that, Damien laughed while holding his sides.

“This fellow is a work of art. Bachscouf-sama, they do not seem to know anything at all.”

“No, they’re just feigning ignorance, I think. I’m sure they are aware that lager is a prohibited item.”

Chapter 30

The Secret of “Toriaezu Nama” (Part 2)

The next morning, Shinobu posted a large notice stating “Eel bento is unavailable today” on the glass door.

Even though the weather had cleared up, as though yesterday’s storm had been a lie, Shinobu’s mind had not.

In the end, Eva, Helmina, and even Berthold had stayed behind. Everyone’s eyes were swollen from the lack of sleep

When he had run into Bachschouf while on the way to ‘Nobu’, he had learned that the lager, a prohibited item, had been discovered.

“I had heard stories of the previous Emperor discovering a new technique in his younger days. Since it was extraordinarily delicious, it seems that the Imperial Family decided to restrict the circulation of the product in order to limit the number of people who could drink it.”

If an unlicensed person tried to sell it, it would be a serious crime, and that person could be fined. In the worst case scenario, they could even be sentenced to death. Shinobu and Nobuyuki were troubled that it was considered a serious offence, and could not think of a good solution.

Well, there was a way.

Simply put, Izakaya Nobu had to close down.

The front door, which was connected to the Old Capital of a different world, would be closed, and they would just live in Japan.

The conversion of the Old Capital’s currency could be done through a shady antiquity dealer. With their savings, they had enough to pay the deposit to open a pub or a small restaurant.

However, they did not want to do that.

It had already been six months since the store had opened during the wold winter. They were also very friendly with the regulars who had frequented the store until now. It would be hard to break off those friendly relationships.

There was also Eva's issue. Eva's family was now in a stable situation, thanks to her income from working at Nobu, but if the store were to close down, the family would return to their previous life.

Was there no method other than evacuating from the Old Capital?

"But, to think that that skinny old man Bachschouf even tried to lay his hands on Helmina...unforgivable."

"That's because Helmina-san is cute."

Eva comforted Berthold, who had slammed his fist into his palm.

Helmina, who had been told those things yesterday, was still in shock, and she was wrapped in a thin blanket.

"At any rate, we need to come up with countermeasures."

"But Taisho, people who are familiar with that sort of thing would be..."

Even though there was a variety of people among the regulars, only a limited number of them were well informed in such matters.

"Nicolas-san? Gernot-san? Deacon Edwin...?"

"Ah, did I hear my name being called?"

Deacon Edwin pulled the glass door open.

He looked the same as always, but it was unusual for him to make an appearance at Nobu at this time.

"What's the matter, Deacon? You're here so early in the morning."

"No, I had a feeling that something had happened...but it seems that I was mistaken."

"Misunderstood?"

Edwin pointed his chin in Berthold's and Helmina's direction, who were cuddling with each other.

“Yesterday night, Bachschouf’s secretary weathered the storm to come over to the church, bringing some unusual documents. It was a request to investigate the validity of Berthold and Helmina’s marriage, which bothered me.”

“What’d you say?!”

Nobuyuki and Eva calmed the enraged Berthold down. Helmina buried her face into the blanket, and seemed like she would break into tears at any moment.

“Is that skinny old man trying to make fun of me... let’s raid him. Hans and Nikolaus, no, the whole company will go to that Bachschouf’s residence and reduce it to ashes!”

“Deacon Edwin, what is the result of the investigation?”

Deacon Edwin stroked Eva’s head, who was looking up at him anxiously, with a gloomy expression.

“Normally, there wouldn’t be a problem. An inquiry would be sent to the church in the Northern Port, and it would end. But, not this time.”

“Are there any problems, Deacon?”

“Even though I shouldn’t tell such a story to a child like Eva, there was a vacancy for the position of cardinal.”

The Archbishop, the head of the parish in the Old Capital, was using lots of gold to bribe influential people, in order to become a Cardinal.

Deacon Edwin feared that, if Bachschouf had connections with the Archbishop, the request for an investigation would most likely be accepted.

A gloomy atmosphere engulfed the store.

It was during such times that one had to be firm.

Shinobu stood up and walked behind the counter.

“Well, everyone. Let’s have breakfast.”

Since so many people were present, the menu consisted of dishes that could be eaten easily. There were rice balls with miso soup, tamagoyaki, and fried wieners.

Eva and Shinobu were in charge of making the rice balls.

“The salt makes it more delicious.”

Edwin spoke with false cheeriness after biting into the rice ball.

Even though Berthold’s expression was stiff, he shared half of his rice ball with Helmina. He flinched slightly upon seeing the octopus wieners, but once Nobuyuki explained that it wasn’t squid, it seemed that he took a liking to it.

Nobuyuki explained yesterday’s circumstances to Edwin while slurping his miso soup.

Edwin listened silently from the beginning to end, and let out a groan when it ended.

“Lager, huh.”

“Is it that bad?”

Edwin nodded gravely at Nobuyuki, who was leaning forwards while on his knees.

“The previous Emperor, His Majesty, was a very wise person. Rather than calling it a ban, it was more of a restriction on the circulation of lager. They set it at 30 years as a preparatory phase to put them out on the market as a special product from the Imperial Capital.”

Since the Empire had been struggling with economic difficulties for a long time, they were seeking a product that had a high return rate, and it seemed that lager had been their pick.

Certainly, even Shinobu understood that if their beer, which required an original manufacturing method, were to circulate, profits would rise. It was similar to the eel bento from Izakaya Nobu. If it couldn’t be bought from somewhere else, then one could profit as much as they liked.

“However, I think that the production output did not rise as intended. The imperial writ is still in place, but its influence is slowly fading.”

“Is there no way to revoke it?”

“How? The previous Emperor, the grandfather of the current Emperor, is held in high esteem by His Majesty, so it would be difficult to revoke. Thereafter, there are rumors that they successfully mass-produced the lager.”

“Is that so...”

Edwin put his hands on Nobuyuki’s shoulder, who was feeling dejected.

“There is no choice but to hope that the restriction on the circulation of lager is withdrawn by the previous emperor, His Majesty himself.”

“Eh?”

Was the previous Emperor still alive? Shinobu opened her mouth, but stopped, thinking that it was dangerous. It would be extremely disrespectful to not know whether he was still alive or not. It would turn ugly if she asked an excessive number of strange questions.

“Even if you say so, it is unlikely to happen this time. One day won’t be enough to directly appeal to the previous Emperor, His Majesty. Bachschouf’s side will move quickly.”

“No way...”

Eva fell onto her butt with a thud.

Shinobu tried to think of solutions, but could not come up with a good idea. In the first place, it was doubtful whether one existed.

Return to Japan? That idea had crossed her mind many times.

At this moment, Nobuyuki let out a groan, as if he had decided to do something.

“Anyway, let’s continue tonight’s business as usual.”

The first customer was the Guild Master of the Blacksmith Guild, Holger.

Since Eva and Helmina had went back, only Shinobu and Nobuyuki were in the store.

He took his usual spot in the middle by the counter, and the first thing that came out of his mouth was something unexpected.

“During today’s city council meeting, the topic of Izakaya Nobu came up.”

“Eh? What does that mean?”

Holger grimaced at Shinobu, who had leaned forward.

“It’s not good news. Rather, please be prepared if the situation turns bad.”

“Is it about...the lager?”

“Ah, so you knew?”

As always, it was the City Council’s job to settle any unresolved problems peacefully, but it seemed that Bachschouf had brought that topic up when the remaining item on the agenda concerned matters between the three territories in the North and the Old Capital.

“The members of the council were taken by surprise too. Even though everyone knew that the ale from this store was good, they did not think it could possibly be lager. No, since I have not drunk another lager, there was understandably nothing to compare it with.”

“So, what happened next?”

“I don’t know whether you are acquainted with him, but Godhardt-shi, from the Water Transportation Guild, defended you fiercely. He had an amazingly terrifying look.”

It must have been related to eel. Shinobu understood that intuitively.

If something like a punishment was handed down to Izakaya Nobu, the fishing rights he had gotten from the Old Capital would have been in vain. If you thought about it, it was probably a form of support.

“In the first place, since the topic about the bar was brought up by President Bachschouf, who was known for his suspicious activities, we couldn’t help but speak up. Even that foolish glass smith, Lorentz, had the same opinion as me.”

“Lorentz-san too...”

“That’s because that fellow’s family, both parent and son, are regulars at this store. If this store disappears, they would be troubled. It was also interesting to see that the three major Water Transportation Guilds, who are known to be on bad terms with each other, came together and defended Nobu.”

When you thought about it, a variety of people came to this store to eat and drink. Even though it was a bad time to notice such a strange feeling, a warm feeling filled Shinobu’s heart.

“However, Bachschouf was one step ahead. He seems to have laid the groundwork beforehand. This store has become the target of investigation for the city council.”

“Is that so...”

“The investigator-in-charge is the tax collector, Gernot. He’s the kind of man who enjoys sinking his fangs into you and will suck your bones dry, given the chance. You should be careful.”

“Gernot-san, huh.”

Gernot was a regular customer.

After eating Shinobu’s Napolitan, he sometimes dropped by the store to have a meal. In particular, the eel was his favourite. He would definitely buy three boxes of eel bento without fail.

If it was Gernot, then he might spare some consideration on this matter. However, that faint hope was mercilessly crushed by Holger.

“Gernot was really fired up. There was rarely any work for him in the City Council. If he obtains some achievements, his future will be secured. There were times when he would visit the store a few times so as to not overlook anything. That is how skillful he is at being a tax collector.”

When he finished speaking, he placed money on the counter for the cup of ale and a serving of appetizer he had consumed earlier, and then got up from his seat.

“I like this store, and I believe that the suspicions are unfounded. However, the opponent this time is that Gernot. If you have somewhere to hide yourself, you should start preparing.”

It seemed that he had come just to give advice.

It was understood that it would be dangerous for a city council member to be in contact with Izakaya Nobu. If one were unlucky, they could easily be accused of destroying evidence.

Still, he had come to this store. They couldn't help but feel grateful for his thoughtfulness.

“Taisho, what do we do?”

“What *do* we do, huh?”

“We should make preparations to escape like Holger-san said, but...”

It was possible to escape.

It wouldn't be impossible to open the store somewhere else.

However, Nobuyuki didn't hesitate at all.

“As long as the store remains here, I'll remain here.”

“But, we might be arrested? Even if we're not arrested, customers might stop coming once we have gained a suspicious reputation.”

Nobuyuki averted his eyes and gave a fleeting glance in another direction. Shinobu was tempted into following his line of sight.

The household shrine was there. Today's offering was Gomoku fried beancurd with sesame seeds.

“We'll cross that bridge when we get there. This is an izakaya. Whenever there are customers, it will remain open. Let's think about what to do when the time comes, rather than feeling helpless.”

Shinobu nodded to those words with her best smile.

“Now then, let's work hard again today.”

“Yes!”

The case spread throughout the Old Capital in no time, due to its gossip-loving residents.

Shinobu and Nobuyuki were expecting fewer customers, but the amount of customers clearly increased after that day.

In addition to the regulars, there were first time customers showing up out of goodwill, to the extent that Shinobu and Nobuyuki did not even have time to rest.

However, only Gernot had not appeared at the store.

Then, the fated day arrived.

Chapter 31

The Secret of 'Toriaezu Nama' (Part 3)

Izakaya Nobu had made preparations to greet the representative the next morning, based on the directive that the City Council had sent out the previous evening.

The notification letter was quite elaborate; it was in an envelope sealed with a wax seal, and a piece of high quality parchment paper was inside.

The signatures of both Bachschouf and Gernot were lined up at the bottom of the letter, which signified that it was an official letter.

"There was nothing written on the paper."

Nobuyuki muttered while grumbling.

Today, neither Helmina nor Eva was called in.

Shinobu and Nobuyuki were standing together in front of the shop, which had been cleaned beautifully.

Somehow, when they were together, they felt that they could do something about it, one way or another.

"Speaking of strange things, it is weird, huh."

"About preventing our escape?"

Shinobu had properly thought about that option.

If Nobuyuki were to run away, it would be akin to confessing to the crime, and he would be branded as a criminal.

"I wonder if they will read the charges out loud and arrest us immediately."

"I don't like that..."

"I just wanted to grill bacon."

According to Nikolaus, the highest level punishment for smuggling lager was the death penalty.

In addition to that, offenders could also be burned at the stake as punishment.

However, that form of punishment was only limited to people who had revealed the manufacturing method of lager, or those who had attempted to smuggle lager outside of the country in bulk.

Even if Shinobu and Nobuyuki were to be arrested, Nikolaus had predicted that they would only be fined or imprisoned.

“Ugh... Have they come?”

Nobuyuki squinted his eyes.

The clatter of the horses’ hooves, which were pulling the carriages, gradually approached the store.

Though they weren’t sure whether it was the same carriage that had come by during the stormy evening, they were still splendid carriages, engraved with the emblem of the city council.

The two carriages slowed down, and stopped unhurriedly in front of the store.

“To wait for us without fleeing, how admirable.”

The first thing that Damien did as he got out of the carriage was hurl abusive words.

Both Gernot and Bachschouf followed him out. They didn’t seem to be accompanied by guards.

Shinobu tried to catch Gernot’s eyes, but he skillfully evaded her gaze. However, he had a stern expression.

“Now, what are we still doing here in front of the store?”

Nobuyuki opened the glass door, and the others followed him inside.

The atmosphere, which had been calm before, now felt extremely strained. It was a little suffocating.

Shinobu thought about preparing some tea, but Gernot’s stare and clearing of his throat held her back. Was it possible that he had been bribed?

“Now then, shall we begin?”

Everyone took a seat at Bachschouf’s words.

It was a four person table. Bachschouf and Gernot were sitting near the entrance, while Shinobu and Nobuyuki sat on the opposite side. Damien placed himself in front of the door as an observer, probably to prevent them from escaping.

Gernot took out a thick bundle of parchments from the bag he was holding under his armpit.

These were probably the results of the investigation on the lager, a prohibited item. As far as Shinobu could see, she couldn't understand anything other than the fact that the characters were written neatly, line by line.

"Now then, Gernot-kun, let's get started quickly. We have a City Council meeting in the afternoon."

"I shall do so, since there should be many things to settle at today's meeting."

"Oh, that's right. *That* meeting is nearing. For the Old Capital's honour, that meeting must carry on smoothly, at any cost."

The meeting was a conference with the three territories in the north. According to Deacon Edwin, important people would gather for conferences at the Old Capital because it was considered a neutral city.

"It would be problematic if this contraband issue was discovered before the important meeting in the Old Capital. My reputation is on the line, so I would like to maintain a clean slate. "

"This Gernot wholly agrees with you, chairman."

Based on Gernot's attitude, one would wonder whether he already belonged to the other side.

Even though she understood that he was like that due to his job as a tax collector, Shinobu couldn't help but feel a little lonely.

"Now then, I will report the final results of the investigation."

A piece of parchment with fine, closely packed letters written on it was unfurled onto the table. Shinobu realized that she had only memorized a little of the Empire's official language, so she felt relieved that she couldn't understand what was written.

“This is the data obtained from the Empire’s alcohol brewing director. It took some time for this lager incident to be investigated, since we had to communicate with the one in charge of brewing lager.”

The Sommeliers were the official authority on brewing alcohol. Based on Gernot’s tone, it seemed to be a government position with quite a significant amount of power.

“I see, the director of alcohol brewing, huh? However, how is it possible to escape their eyes when such strict monitoring is already in place? “

“It is possible, so a thorough investigation was conducted this time. As a result, it was found out that a considerable amount of lager was smuggled out.”

“I knew it! As expected.”

It was a dire situation.

If the smuggled lager was currently being sold in Izakaya Nobu, they would be found guilty. Nobuyuki hung his head down too.

“This time, the director was infuriated by this matter, so he ordered all of the employees in the alcohol brewing office to be investigated. This was the result.”

“I have troubled you this much, huh. However, we are grateful. It will save us trouble if we single out the dishonest employees from the investigation.”

Bachschof grabbed the parchment that Gernot presented, but his expression changed as he read it.

“Gernot-kun... What is the meaning of this? If I remember correctly, didn’t you just say that a considerable amount was smuggled out?”

“That is indeed true.”

“Then, what is with this difference in amount?! Only 37 barrels were smuggled out?”

“There were 37 barrels of lager that should not have been distributed, and were smuggled out. I cannot help but call this a considerable amount.”

Certainly, 37 barrels could be considered a considerable amount, but it was too little to amount to anything significant.

“On top of that, the whereabouts of 30 barrels have already been located?”

“Yes. It seems that they had been secretly bought by the regent of the Eastern Kingdom for a banquet. That is most unforgivable.”

“But... You do not know where the remaining seven barrels are, don't you? Were they sold in this pub?”

Gernot shook his head in disapproval at Bachschouf's words.

“Izakaya Nobu set up shop in the Old Capital half a year ago. If they had been selling lager for all this time, it would be impossible with only seven barrels. Don't you think so?”

“Adulteration! They must have mixed ale and lager together! It must be so!”

“Indeed, such a ruse is possible as well. However, that is also impossible.”

After looking over the next parchment that was handed to him, Bachschouf's angry red face turned grim.

“Of the remaining seven barrels that were smuggled out, it was reported that six of them had been carried to the southern region of the Empire, and had been smuggled over the border. I fear that it's likely that those barrels were smuggled to the Holy Kingdom. It is unnatural for lager that has crossed the border to reappear in the capital.”

“B...But, Gernot-Kun. One barrel. There's still one barrel left, isn't there?”

“Yes. But it is only one barrel. If this one barrel had been used to adulterate... Do you think you would still taste the lager when you drink it, Bachschouf-san?”

“Ugh!”

Gernot was Nobu's ally.

Shinobu felt ashamed of herself for doubting him a moment ago.

When she glanced at Bachschouf, she could see his distorted expression. Not only had his plans to take over the store crumbled, he would also suffer humiliation for stirring up the City Council.

“By the way, Bachschouf-san... There is something I want to know.”

“What is it, Gernot-kun? I will not answer trivial questions.”

“It isn’t trivial. In fact, it’s a very important issue. How did you recognise the taste of lager?”

At that moment, Bachschouf’s expression froze.

“Well, that’s because I was invited to a feast held by a noble when I was at the Imperial Capital. I must’ve tasted lager there...”

“Whose banquet was it? And in which month and year was it held? Since only someone who is a part of the Imperial Family can drink lager, there is a possibility that this noble has committed a serious offence.”

“Ah, no. I was wrong. That, that is. Let’s see.”

Gernot cleared his throat, and took out another piece of parchment.

“Actually, I have roughly grasped the whereabouts of the remaining barrel. It’s in the Old Capital.”

“Ah, come on. Then, isn’t everything solved? That one barrel is in this pub after all...”

“Well, I wonder.”

Bachschouf suddenly stood up from his seat.

“Of course it is! You, girl, bring me a mug. Pour one for Gernot-san, too. That ‘Toriazazu Nama’. Everything will become clear with this.”

“Ah, I shall decline.”

Bachschouf grabbed Gernot's collar when he refused, and demanded an explanation while nearly screaming.

"Why?! You will understand when you drink it!"

"Why? I won't understand even if I drink it, you know. Because I have never drunk a drop of lager, which is a prohibited item, in my whole life. And..."

"And?"

"I am on duty right now."

Gernot answered as he straightened his collar, while Bachschouf slumped down onto his chair.

"Bachschouf-san, please listen until the end. When I said 'roughly', I had already found out that it was delivered to the Bachschouf Firm. What I didn't know was who had drunk it."

Bachshouf stared at the ceiling with a pale face.

Shinobu couldn't understand what was going on at all.

She could only make out that Bachschouf was apparently the one who had smuggled the lager.

At that moment, there was suddenly the sound of the glass door opening.

"Damien!"

Shinobu looked over at the glass door when Bachschouf shouted, but Damien's figure was already nowhere to be seen. It seemed as though he had abandoned his master and run away.

However, Gernot was perfectly composed.

"Let's leave the small fry alone. I'm sorry to bother you, Taisho-san, but could you go to the guard's post and call for someone? Since it's necessary for me to stay with the criminal who has dealt with illegal goods."

Nobuyuki nodded, stood up, and ran outside.

“Well, looks like it’ll be busy today. There are many things to settle in the meeting. Including the successor of Chairman Bachschouf.”

Chapter 32

The Secret of “Toriaezu Nama” (Part 4)

“Cheers!”

Toasts and cheers echoed throughout the store.

That evening, the store’s regulars had gathered for a feast.

Even though it was called a feast, Shinobu and Nobuyuki had not actually planned it. At first, the regulars came in small groups of twos or threes, but before they knew it, it had become a feast.

They pushed two tables together, and it became a buffet-style party.

Nobuyuki had put his best effort into making all the dishes that were laid on the table.

“Cheers!”

Hans and Nikolaus also clinked their glasses.

Nobody knew how many times they had done this. Some of the lager spilled onto the floor as they drank, their arms around each other’s shoulders.

Helmina was wiping the floor beneath their feet. Her husband would have gotten angry if he saw this, but the person in question, Berthold, was deep in conversation with Nobuyuki and the others by the counter.

“Still, Gernot is really great. He prepared this much in such a short amount of time.”

When Berthold mentioned Gernot, who wasn’t there, the regulars sitting down near the counter nodded in agreement.

“He had connections with the Empire’s brewery, I suppose. Is it because of his love for eel bento?”

“That... I think it’s something else, Holger. It wasn’t eel, but it was a dish called Napolitan. There’s no doubt about it, since I heard him say that today.”

Nobuyuki tilted his head at the statement from Lorentz, of the Glass Smith Guild.

“That’s strange. We’ve never served Napolitan in this store... Shinobu-chan, do you know anything about it?”

After being called out all of a sudden, Shinobu hid half of her face with the tray.

“Eh, that, no... I don’t know about any Napolitan. Perhaps Gernot-san misunderstood?”

“Come to think of it... there was an instance when the bacon that was supposed to go with my drink went missing. Shinobu-chan, didn’t you say before that your favorite dish was Napolitan with bacon?”

“E, eh... Ah, it looks like there’s a new customer.”

Shinobu sensed a presence by the glass door and took advantage of the situation to escape.

If she said something careless, many of her other misdeeds with her employee meals would have been laid out on the table.

“I’m sorry, is Deacon Edwin bothering you here?”

Unexpectedly, the person who appeared was a young manservant employed by the Church.

Shinobu recognized his face, since he had come to fetch Edwin, who often snuck out at night to come here, several times.

“Ah, what’s wrong? The priest should have already been informed that the deacon was taking today off, though. Anyway, do join us in celebrating this joyous occasion. I won’t accept it if you refuse.”

“The priest-sama was very angry regarding that matter, but that’s not it. There is an urgent delivery.”

The young man took a single envelope out of his pocket.

Edwin, who received it, carefully scrutinized the seal of the envelope with his aging eyes, then let out a small laugh after looking at it.

“Let me see... Ah, this, huh? Even though it took a bit of trouble, it seems that it wasn't a waste, after all. Berthold, this is a gift for you.”

“A gift from Deacon Edwin? That makes me feel uneasy.”

When Shinobu tried taking a peek, she didn't recognize the stamp used for its seal. However, the regulars seemed to have an idea about it.

“This... isn't this the seal of the Holy Kingdom?”

“Godhardt-san, there's eel sauce on your lips. Please don't eat and talk at the same time. Ah, but, that is definitely the seal of the Holy Order from the Holy Kingdom. This is unusual.”

Godhardt and Reinhold, who had been arguing with each other, both looked at the envelope on their way out of the store. Eleonora had wanted to join in today's feast as well, but she had another engagement that she couldn't get away from, so she was absent.

“What's the Holy Order?”

“Shinobu-san, the Holy Order is an organization that stands above the Church. It is where His Honor the Head Priest and His Eminence the Cardinal, come from.”

“Ehh, you sure know a lot, Eva-chan. But, why would Deacon Edwin get a letter from such a place?”

At their urging, Berthold opened the envelope. There was only one, very fine sheet of high quality parchment inside. The words were written in an elegant and ornate manner.

“In God's name, I bless the marriage of Berthold, son of Benedict, and Helmina, daughter of Franz. Given by Cardinal Hürghigegot of the Holy Order... eh, Deacon Edwin, this, this is?!”

“This is my first time seeing Commander Berthold surprised. That's right, this is a validation letter, from the Holy Order, on your marriage with Miss Helmina. As

long as you have this, even the silly objections of a parish's Archbishop will be rejected."

Although Edwin was smiling as he drained his mug of lager, the letter seemed rather outrageous.

"There's... there's no way a cardinal would simply write something like this... Deacon, you..."

"Like I said, it took a bit of trouble, you know. If you're feeling indebted, then perhaps you could foot my bill to return the favor."

Edwin firmly grasped the speechless Berthold's outstretched hands. Someone was moving in the background. Nikolaus interrupted with a mug in one hand.

"Hans, on the other hand, feels that his efforts were wasted."

"Oi, Nikolaus, you fool, stop it!"

"This guy started a petition to reduce the penalty for Nobu and was asking for signatures, but it was all for naught, even though he succeeded. It was a sizeable amount, right? One hundred and eighteen people, right?"

"...It was 123 people. But you were the same!"

"Wait, don't say anything unnecessary, Hans!"

Lager spilled on the floor as Nikolaus raged while still holding his mug.

"You even threw yourself on the ground before your ex-girlfriend, the daughter of the liquor vendor, and another ex-girlfriend, the widow of a craft beer brewer, to ask for help in forging a business contract for ale."
(*TL: He did a dogeza.*)

"It would have been better if you didn't say such things! God!"

Nikolaus might have known that this store didn't stock up on ale from anywhere in the Old Capital. No, he might have specifically looked into it.

That was why he had tried to forge a contract, to pretend that there had been transactions.

“Hans-kun, your father, Lorentz-san, was also amazing.”

“Holger, you bastard!”

“In order to prevent the shutdown of Izakaya Nobu, he went to the council members from Bachschouf’s faction and laid down some groundwork. Though, it seems that it wasn’t very effective.”

“Holger even approached Bachschouf Firm’s clients and threatened them to switch companies!”

Had he hit the nail on the head? Holger’s face turned red.

“....About that. I just thought that a company that would try to forcefully take over such a good shop wasn’t a suitable partner for my guild.”

“Yes, yes, yes, if you say so.”

“Grrr...”

Shinobu was looking at Godhardt and Reinhold, who were laughing because they, including the absent Eleonora, knew that the funds that Bachschouf had prepared for the sake of the purchase would be opposed. Moreover, Eva had prayed at the shrine every day.

“Hey, Taisho.”

“What is it, Shinobu-chan?”

“I’m really glad that we opened our store in this town.”

Nobuyuki nodded lightly without answering.

He then brought out a large serving of deep fried food, which had been coated in tempura batter.

“Now then, the *kushikatsu* is ready!”

(TL: *kushikatsu* is deep fried skewered food coated in tempura batter)



The guests cheered loudly, and the *kushikatsu* that had just been served disappeared, one after another, into everyone's stomachs.

The feast that day lasted well into the night. Consequently, the participants suffered a bad hangover the next day.



Chapter 33

The Old Man and the Fish (Part 1)

A long time had passed since Johann Gustav had visited this store. If he remembered correctly, it had still been winter during his previous visit. It was fortunate that they had come to this store when he brought his selfish niece out to make some good memories in the town before her marriage.

“Johann Gustav, is it this store?”

“Yes, dear uncle. It looks like quite an interesting store, doesn’t it?”

Johann Gustav had brought a companion with him this evening. His companion was not as difficult to handle as his niece was, but he was still quite a challenge. Johann Gustav could not even imagine what this robust, silver-haired uncle would eat at this store.

The early summer’s sunlight still shone, even though it was dusk, making his forehead drip with sweat.

He had brought his uncle along to this interesting store, which he had just remembered, on such a day in order to enjoy the cool breeze and drink.

“Excuse me.”

“Welcome!”

“...’elcome.”

When the glass door was pulled open, a cool chill and a lively voice greeted them from within the store. The shop had been warmer when he came during the winter. Was it due to some kind of device?

“It’s fairly empty today, isn’t it?”

Johann Gustav asked the waitress as he guided his uncle towards the seats by the counter. He thought that there would be more customers in the store, but it seemed that it was his lucky day today, and he was grateful for it.

“Since the previously mentioned conference is going to be held the day after tomorrow, the whole town is feeling tense.”

“I see.”

He already knew about the meeting.

There would be a small conference held in the Old Capital in two days.

The representatives of the three northern territories, who did not even bother to hide their intention of breaking away from the Empire, would meet the Empire’s representative here.

Although there was an incident in the Old Capital regarding the City Council’s chairman, Bachschouf, being dismissed just before the conference, thanks to the efforts of the Council’s other members, they managed to hold the meeting safely.

The Empire had a policy to prevent anyone from withdrawing, but it seemed that the other side had taken the Empire lightly and had called them an old pig. Johann Gustav had heard that the conference was expected to be a difficult one.

“It is a disaster for this store, huh.”

“That is not true, you know. Even though we would be troubled if this slow period continues for a long time, we can still properly serve the customers who come in on such days.”

The waitress replied with a smile as she served the appetizer.

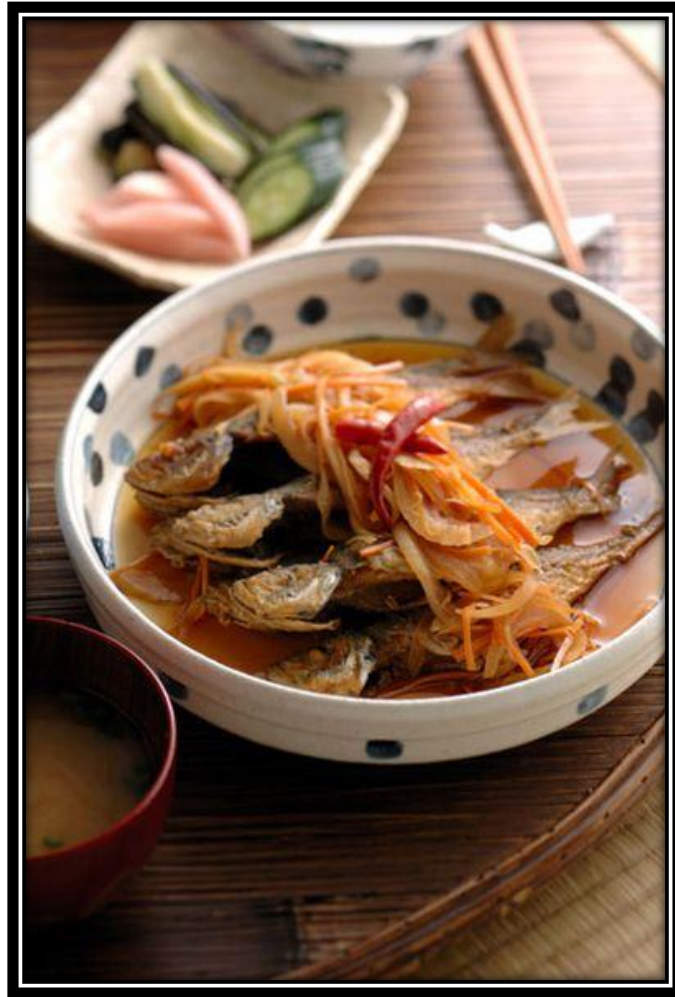
It was a small bowl containing some kind of fish.

“Oh, is this herring?”

The uncle asked as he peeked into the unusual, small bowl.

“No, that’s not herring. It’s *koaji no nanbanzuke*.”

(*TL: koaji: small horse mackerel, nanbanzuke: fried fish marinated in vinegar*)



“*Nanbanzuke*, you say. Yet another dish I have not heard about.”

“It is fried small horse mackerel that has been dipped into a sweet-and-sour sauce. Since it would be too hot to serve when it is freshly fried, I have served one that was pickled beforehand.”

“I see.”

His uncle became interested and brought a piece to his mouth with his fork. Johann Gustav copied him and followed after him.

One might say it was sour, but it was not sour to the point that it became unpleasant.

There was a refreshing sweet and sour taste, which was followed by a subtle spiciness. After that, the taste of the fish would spread in the mouth. It was delicious.

Johann Gustav, who was a noble, took pride in having tasted a variety of dishes, and he figured that only a select few people from the Eastern Kingdom could cook a recipe with such delicate flavours.

“This is really good, Johann Gustav.”

“Yes, dear uncle. This sour taste is wonderful. Even though my appetite had decreased during the summer, it seems I was able to eat this.”

“Indeed. But, I wonder, what is this subtle spicy flavour that is responsible for enhancing the sourness?”

His uncle used his fork and took out a small, red, rounded object hidden in the small bowl.

It certainly looked spicy, based on its appearance.

“That is correct. That is *takanotsume*, a kind of seasoning. Its spiciness was used in this dish to enhance the flavour.”

(TL note: takanotsume: red pepper)

Johann Gustav and his uncle looked at one another after listening to the waitress’s explanation.

“*Takanotsume*, you say? It is a suitable seasoning for my uncle, isn’t it?”

“Indeed, Johann Gustav. This is a good sign, I suppose.”

His uncle slightly cleared his throat as the waitress, who did not understand, looked on with a smile.

“By the way, ojou-san. I’m sorry, but this *nanbanzuke*, I mean, I think this will really go well with my choice of liquor.”

“Sure! What would you like?”

“Is the ale here good, Johann Gustav?”

“When I came here in the past, it was called ‘Toriaezu Nama’”

When he spoke out that name, the waitress, the store owner, and even the dishwasher girl all showed apologetic expressions.

“I’m sorry, honoured guest. We do not serve ‘Toriaezu Nama’ anymore.”

Even though the store owner bowed, the uncle was not one to give up so easily.

“That’s regrettable. I have come to this store tonight in order to drink this ‘Toriaezu Nama’, you know. Could you please make an exception for me?”

“I’ve heard about the incident with Bachschouf. However, if there is still some in stock, is it possible to let my dear uncle drink it?”

The waitress and the store owner looked at each other and nodded. It was something they both agreed on. The waitress immediately vanished behind the counter.

“Specially for today.”

Shinobu brought out an ordinary mug filled with a golden liquid. The uncle, who was attentive to details, looked at the foam with his pointed eyes. After observing it for a while, the uncle rubbed his palms together as he faced the mug.

“Now then, excuse me.”

With a gulping sound, the mug’s golden liquid smoothly flowed into his stomach. One would never have thought that this drinking man was 78 years old this year. Johann Gustav followed suit. He was not able to savour it properly when he had previously brought Hildegarde, but now that he drank it again, he could tell that the taste was a masterpiece.

The uncle placed the mug down with a clang, and suddenly bursted into laughter. His uncle had not laughed this much in a long time. In fact, it was so intense that it could be called a guffaw.

“Johann Gustav! It’s a masterpiece! This thing is a masterpiece!”

“So, what do you say?”

“Did you say there was a bastard who suspected that this was lager?”

“Yes, I heard it from Baron Branton.”

Baron Branton, who owned a territory near the Old Capital, was obsessed with this incident and had made an appeal to the Imperial Diet to withdraw the imperial edict regarding the time limit of the prohibition of the circulation of lager.

Who would have thought that such a haughty, tall man would move for a mere pub? It became the topic of conversation amongst the upper class society for a while, since the reasons for his actions were unknown.

“I do not know whether that guilty bastard has actually drunk lager before, but this is definitely not the “lager which is not allowed to be traded by law”. I can testify for that.”

“So, this is ale then?”

“No. It is probably lager. However, the taste is different from the one made by the alcohol brewing company in the Imperial Capital. The other side tasted strong, but this has a crisp taste, which is better.”

“I see.”

“If there are lagers that have already been made in other places, then that edict is meaningless. I see even the Branton can sometimes say something smart.”

The uncle cheerfully asked for another cup. In addition, the appetizer was also replaced.

This *nanbanzuke* paired well with lager.

Johann Gustav wanted to make it at home, so he tried to memorize the taste and appearance of the dish as much as possible before leaving.

“Now then, dear customer, what main course would you like to order?”

“Oh right. Then, I would like to have fish. An exceptionally delicious one would be nice.”

Chapter 34

The Old Man and the Fish (Part 2)

A plate of a slender fish, which looked baked well-seasoned, was served. Johann Gustav was intrigued to see dried fish, which was commonplace, being served in this store.

The uncle had a different expression, and picked up the fork as he smiled.

“This is sardine *shoyuyaki*.” (TL: shoyuyaki: broiled in soy sauce)



Even though he had never heard of sardine, the saltiness had soaked into it properly and tasted delicious. The taste might not pair well with ale or lager, but it stimulated his appetite.

“The *nanbanzuke* from before was pretty good, but I like this better. It has a rustic beauty, or rather, it is like you are eating in a fishing village. It has that kind of simplicity.”

“Dear uncle, have you been to a fishing village before?”

“I was brought up near the sea before I joined my son-in-law’s family.”

“The flavours of the food in the fishing village were also stronger.” The uncle continued.

“You sweat when you move your body. We sweated a lot while we were hunting, you know. It was to the extent that when it dried, you could blow salt off. You come to crave salty food when you have sweated that much.”

Johann Gustav, who was also eating the sardine, was surprised when he saw that his uncle had even devoured the bones with a voracious appetite. The culture was different, so the meals were completely different from the ones served in the imperial court and nobles’ feasts.

“When the place changes, the food changes as well. The Empire is huge. The bread that we normally eat is made from wheat, but I heard that they mix it with barley in places north of the Old Capital. They do that in the territories that the Empire is negotiating with.”

“I don’t understand. Why can’t everybody eat the same thing?”

“Don’t be foolish. That would only be possible for a kingdom. The Empire, on the other hand, must have the capacity to cover the daily necessities of all the different people, including food and clothing. If one cannot do that, then they shouldn’t call themselves an Empire.”

Even though Johann Gustav was a noble, from time to time, he could not understand his uncle’s advanced explanations. At this moment, he had to be careful with what he said, in order to ensure that his uncle did not get angry.

“Coming up, fried horse mackerel. Please pour the sauce over it before eating.”



It was not the waitress from before who served the dish. Instead, it was the dishwasher girl. She was quite an adorable girl who, unlike the other two employees, looked like a native of the Empire.

“Do I pour the sauce myself? This is another interesting idea.”

The uncle poured the sauce, which was like a pitch-black coating, over the dish. However, the crispiness from the frying could still be seen.

“So, do you cut this with a knife and fork?”

When Johann Gustav asked the girl who had carried the dish, she replied with a laugh.

“It’s no good to eat fried mackerel in a well-mannered way. The secret to eating it deliciously is to eat it messily, in one gulp.”

The uncle, who heard it, became delighted and put his knife down.

“Eat it messily, you say. I have not done that in such a long time.”

Johann Gustav stabbed the fried mackerel with his fork and timidly brought it to his mouth.

The thick sauce coating, which had a hint of sourness, was strong and matched really well with the mildly flavoured mackerel.

“This goes well with the lager, dear uncle.”

“Yes, this is delicious! It is definitely a taste you would not be able to enjoy if you had cut it up elegantly.”

The uncle had another serving of lager, after which he wolfed down two more pieces of mackerel, which were served to each of them.

“By the way, Johann Gustav, it is a fact that people of the three northern territories still eat with their hands.”

“Yes, one of the rulers of the three territories, Earl Wyndelmarc, was ridiculed for it during the dinner party at the Imperial Capital and got really angry.”

“It was due to all the small things that have piled up, I suppose.”

It seemed that the current Emperor was trying to suppress the independence of the three territories without letting them speak, but was that the correct choice? Johann Gustav felt that the Emperor’s policies were strangely wrong after talking to his uncle.

Of course, as a noble, he would reject the recognition of independence. If one was approved, more would follow. This matter should not be overlooked, since this concerned the dignity of the Empire.

While he was thinking such things, the next dish was carried out.

The little girl from before was carrying it, but it seemed that the plate was a little too big.

“*Karei no nitsuke...kyaa!*”

(TL: karei: righteye flounder, nitsuke: boiled. basically boiled flounder, but the uncle speaks of “karei” a few times so I had to leave this in.)



The plate was too big after all. The girl tripped, and the plate with the splendid fish fell onto the floor.

Fortunately, the plate had not broken, but the fish was ruined. It was a little regretful, seeing as it had looked like a fine dish.

“I...I’m very sorry! Are you injured anywhere?”

The uncle smiled gently at the girl, who was apologizing in a panic, and took out his handkerchief to wipe her face and hands.

“I’m alright. My clothes don’t look dirty either. Leaving that aside, is the little ojou-san alright?”

“Y, yes!”

“It’s not good if you burn yourself. I will give this handkerchief to you, please cool it with water immediately.”

“Thank you very much!”

The store owner and the waitress from a while ago also appeared and bowed as well. The waitress immediately joined the girl in cleaning up the floor. It is true that the girl had failed, but the treatment she received was not cruel. If it were an ordinary izakaya, such reactions would be unlikely.

“But, this fish called ‘*kareï*’ became a waste.”

The uncle muttered regretfully.

It was probably reasonable, since his uncle could not obtain fish where he lived.

“I am really sorry.”

The store owner bowed and apologised politely. It was all fish. It was likely that the customer had assumed this was the main dish.

“No, it’s okay. I am satisfied just knowing that there is a store that can serve fish in the Old Capital.”

“Ah, that’s not it. It’s because the *karei* for the second person will be served a little late.”

“What do you mean?”

He did not completely understand the store owner’s words, but his doubts were washed away when the waitress brought out another plate. The *karei*, which was as big as the one before, was brought out perfectly.

“I will prepare the other one immediately.”

“A, Ah, no. It’s fine. I will split this *karei* with Johann Gustav.”

“Is that so? I understand.”

Did they have so much fish that they could prepare another one? Even though it was unbelievable, there was a real *karei* right in front of his eyes.

Johann Gustav’s opinion of Izakaya Nobu became even better.

However, the uncle, who had some *karei* in his mouth, seemed to be thinking about something else.

When he was deep in thoughts like this, it made Johann Gustav recall his wisdom when he had been on active duty, before he retired.

“The last dish for today is salmon *ochazuke*.”

(*TL: ochazuke: rice in green tea*)



The dish that was introduced and served to them was a bowl of rice with a red fish placed on top of it and soup.

“Is this fish...salmon?”

“Dear uncle, do you know about this?”

“Yes. During winter, it would swim upstream, north of the northern three territories. Its salted products were widely distributed. I’ve eaten it before, when I was very young.”

The uncle, who inserted his wooden spoon into the *chazuke*, seemed disappointed as he talked about it.

“Ah, the skin is not included?”

The waitress, who heard his excessively despondent monologue, panicked and answered.

“It is alright! The skin was peeled off, and not thrown it away! It is now being lightly grilled!”

The store owner heated up the salmon skin on the grill net at those words. An incomparable fragrance tickled their nostrils.

“Do you like salmon skin too, dear customer?”

“Of course. Do you like it too, ojou-san?”

“Yes, it’s my favourite.”

Johann Gustav did not completely understand what salmon skin would taste like, but apparently, it was unbelievably delicious.

“When I was young, if you brought me a salmon skin as thick as my thumb, I would have done anything for it, no matter what the cost.”

“There you go again, with your exaggerations.”

“Luckily, no one ever showed up with a salmon skin, so I guess it was fine. No, I guess you could say it was a disappointment.”

After Johann finished his salmon *ochazuke*, he felt a pleasant drowsiness, and he watched his uncle eat the salmon skin with his liquor.

Lately, he had been too busy to sleep well.

“It looks like you’re sleepy, Johann Gustav. Should we retire for the day?”

“Thank you very much for coming today. We look forward to your next visit.”

The uncle beamed with joy at the waitress’s polite manners.

“Thank you for your offer, but I live a little too far away. However, if I have the chance to do so next time, I will drop by.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Same here. I’m glad I could eat delicious salmon skin here.”

It had been dusk when they entered the store, but now there were stars twinkling in the sky of the Old Capital.

As he made his way back to the inn, the uncle quickly issued orders to the assembled Imperial Guards and his steward.

“I want to change the contents of the dishes served for the conference that will be held the day after tomorrow. It is sudden, but please arrange it without fail.”

Chapter 35

Details of the Three Northern Territories Conference (Part 1)

Gernot ducked under the shop's curtain and ordered a 'Toriazuzu Nama'. Regarding the lager incident, they had been given a warning notice of a temporary ban on 'Toriazuzu Nama', due to the confusion it had caused. Gernot had been the one to tell them.

He informed the surprised Taisho and Shinobu of it with his usual sullen face.

"It has been decided that, starting today, lager circulation will be permitted."

"Is that so?!"

"No one will be punished for drinking lager anymore in the entirety of the Empire. Of course, I believe that this 'Toriazuzu Nama' is not lager."

Initially, the law was supposed to expire after 30 years.

Gernot figured that it would be a problem if the statute stayed in place.

Of course, even though it was an unreasonable law, the captured offenders would be fined heavily, and the lager would be confiscated. This was Gernot's job, the purpose of his work.

In fact, most of Bachschouf's personal assets had already been confiscated by the city council, and his firm was also in decline.

Although the whereabouts of Bachschouf's attendant, Damien, were unknown, Gernot didn't consider it a big issue. Even if one of the small fries had escaped, it wasn't a serious problem.

Everything was over, and the Old Capital had made a profit. Wasn't it a wonderful thing?

Today's appetizer was small horse mackerel nanbanzuke.

The harmony between the sweet, the sour, and the subtle spiciness was simply splendid.

However, the refined Gernot, with his sensitive tongue, could tell that the dish had only been simmered for a short time.

If it had been allowed to simmer for a few days, even members of royalty or nobility would be left moaning over the exquisite taste of the dish.

“At any rate, thank you very much, Gernot-san.”

“Is it about Bachschouf’s case? It’s alright even if you don’t thank me. I was just doing my job as a tax collector.”

Though, it would be a lie if he said he wasn’t really angry at Bachschouf.

That man had hired someone to defend his firm and had tried to evade tax collection.

The City Council’s Commerce Guild had outright opposed the collection of taxes, which was a conspiracy to suppress and lower the amount of tax collected. Behind the scenes, they were profiting from having a hand in smuggling prohibited items. It was an unforgivable act.

This incident was instigated by Bachschouf himself. Therefore, it could only be said that he had to bear all the consequences by himself. It had backfired on him when he had underestimated his opponent, believing it to merely be a dirty pub on the streets.

It was not something Gernot would’ve overlooked.

“Well, it might be childish for someone with the title of City Council member to turn down someone’s gratitude for freeing them from their troubles.”

“What is it? If it is possible to be done in our store, we will do it.”

Gernot involuntarily cleared his throat at Shinobu’s words.

“Anything, you say.”

“Y-yes, I did say that... But... “

“Then, I would like to request something.”

Shinobu backed away, but did not mind his overwhelming vigour.

How long had he been waiting for this day to come?

“...Napolitan. I want you to make it.”

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

It wasn't just Shinobu. Even Taisho and Eva were staring in wonder. However, only Shinobu's reason for her surprise was different from the rest.

“What's wrong? Didn't you say you'll do anything as thanks? This Gernot, will not forget the Napolitan that I ate that day.”

“Wa-wa-wa!”

Taisho and Eva stared strangely at Shinobu, who was raising her voice and flailing her arms in panic. Even though his request was only to make that, what on earth had happened to make her so embarrassed?

“Shinobu-chan, would you rather that I cook the Napolitan?”

Shinobu had resigned herself towards Taisho, who asked suspiciously, and even added a suggestion.

“Ah, no, I mean, yes. Erm, please use good bacon in it, too.”

When Shinobu said the word 'bacon', Taisho's eyes narrowed. He looked like he was holding back his anger.

“... Good bacon, huh. Come to think of it, I had less bacon for my evening drink than normal sometimes. Shinobu-chan, you know something about it, right?”

“A, ahahaha... Let's talk about that later.”

Yes, that bacon was delicious.

Gernot couldn't deny that his drive to take down Bachschouf had stemmed from the thought of never being able to unite with the miracle, the Napolitan, again.

He had sent many letters urging the slow-moving alcohol brewing office, to the point that it became a nuisance. As a result, they had discovered that a total of 37 barrels had been smuggled out, so they had conversely sent a letter to thank him, leaving him unaware of what had happened.

“By the way, how did the conference go?”

Shinobu brought up the subject while waiting for the spaghetti to be thoroughly boiled.

She also held some interest regarding the conference with the Three Northern Territories.

There were signs that the other customers in the store had pricked up their ears too, in order to listen in on the conversation.

Besides, there was no gag order that prevented people from spreading stories about what had happened in the conference, which had ended two days ago.

Usually, Bachschouf and his cronies would have occasionally mixed in groundless rumours with the truth, but after that case, they had fallen silent.

That was why there were many people who did not know about the incident yet.

“Ah, the conference the day before yesterday was amazing. I'm sure it will go down in history.”

Chapter 36

Details of the Three Northern Territories Conference

(Part 2)

As expected, the conference began contentiously.

From the very beginning, the delegates of the Three Northern Territories had no intention of swearing fealty to the Empire.

However, it was still necessary to make preparations if they wanted to oppose the Empire. It was evident from their attitudes that they wanted to delay the onset of war until the farming season had ended.

“The discussion did not progress, and stalled all the way until the conference meal.”

“Was Gernot-san present as well?”

“The city council members were also invited to the conference meal. Hence, I was also present.”

“What kinds of dishes were served?”

Gernot made a slightly disappointed expression at Shinobu, who was very interested. In fact, those present from the Empire’s side were also quite disappointed.

“It was... a very ordinary dish. There was barley bread, grilled salted fish, and meat that was still attached to the bones. Also, there were a lot of potatoes.”

“Aren’t you supposed to serve a much more luxurious meal for a conference meal?”

“Normally, it is so. Especially since the previous Emperor, His Majesty, was the one hosting the conference meal this time. The participants were actually looking forward to a grand feast...”

“It was disappointing, huh?”

“That’s right...”

After all, Eleonora from the Water Transportation Guild did not even touch the food on her plate. The other Council Members were also reluctantly eating it.

“Then, wouldn’t the people from the Northern Three Territories have been angered by such a dish?”

“On the contrary, the delegates, who had been stubborn throughout the meeting, were unusually open during the conference meal, and even started friendly conversations.”

“He~eh”

“It’s all thanks to His Majesty, the previous Emperor.”

When the previous Emperor began to eat his meal with his hands during the conference meal, the participants from the Empire were shocked. It was believed that such a style of eating only belonged to the savage tribes of the North. However, the previous Emperor, who held the highest position there, did it too. Hence, the others had no choice but to follow.

“Then, why was the conference meal carried out in the Northern Style?”

“That’s because... It seems that it had made the delegates of the opposing side let their guard down.”

It was an interesting experience for Gernot as well.

The flat and hard baked bread was used as a plate, so it could be eaten too. When the bread was torn off and dipped into the soup, it would become softer and could be eaten that way.

“The conditions for withdrawing from the Empire were not discussed during the meeting, but during the conference meal.”

“Isn’t that bad?”

“That is not so.”

The previous Emperor's plan was a success.

He had managed to make the savage tribes, who were angry at being made fun of continuously in the Imperial Capital, sit down at the negotiating table.

However, it made it possible for the opponent to take advantage of the situation as well.

"The people of the Northern Tribes despise the Empire, likening it to an old pig. The conditions were extremely harsh as well. If the Empire accepted it as it was, they would have become a laughing stock with the Eastern Kingdom and the likes."

"They were underestimating the Empire, huh."

"Well, yeah."

Taisho appeared from behind Shinobu, giving his feedback.

"I'm sorry to interrupt the climax of the story, but the Napolitan is ready."

"Yes, yes, this is it! Can I have tobasco sauce and cheese too, please?"

"Gernot-san... is quite well-informed."

That was obvious. He had dreamed about reuniting with this pasta for so long. Gourmets, including himself, were known to be attached to certain dishes. He had endured it for so long thus far, so this was like a reward for him. Anybody would jump at the chance.

Delicious!

He almost leapt out of his seat and cried out from its deliciousness the moment he took a bite. It took all of Gernot's self control as a prided City Council member not to do so.

Even though it was slightly different from Shinobu's, the deliciousness of the Napolitan still reigned supreme. In other words, it was the pinnacle of flavour.

Gernot devoured it greedily, not minding that his mouth was getting dirtied.

'Ah, I should've asked for two, no, three servings,' he thought.

Moreover, it would be such a shame if he did not fill up his belly with this heavenly food.

Would it be enough to stop with just this much?

His craving for Napolitan was what motivated him to live on till the next day. Even now, Gernot still thought so.

For the past few months, he had continuously searched for a substitute for Napolitan, through trial-and-error, day after day. His only solace had been his desire for eel bento.

However, it was still not the same. No matter how hard he had searched, there wasn't any food that was comparable to Napolitan.

Therefore, he almost danced for joy in his heart when he was assigned the Bachschouf case.

This way, he could legitimately order Napolitan without seeming unnatural.

He no longer felt bitter about sending letters repeatedly to the nasty alcohol brewing office in order to find a solution. Everything was done for the sake of Napolitan.

Gernot was attacked by a feeling of dreadful desolation when he had devoured everything in the blink of an eye. The blissful encounter was over, and all that was left was the empty plate.

He felt guilty when he realised he was wishing for a second or third Bachschouf to appear.

"Oh, Gernot-san, if you liked Napolitan so much, we can always make it for you anytime, you know?"

"Is... Is that true, Taisho-san?!"

"Y-yes. But it'll be impossible when we're busy."

"That's not a lie, right? You wouldn't lie to a tax collector just to gain benefits, right?"

"It's not a lie, yes."

Gernot looked around after saying so and coughed lightly.

“W-well, this Napolitan is quite delicious. If I pass by Nobu sometime, I’ll order it.”

While Gernot was making a little excuse for himself, Eva quietly handed him a handkerchief.

“Gernot-san, your mouth is dirty, you know.”

“Ah, thank you. Such a considerate girl.”

“Ah, well. So then, what happened to the conference after that?”

Gernot resumed his story after being urged on by Eva.

“The conditions demanded by the delegates from the Three Northern Territories were harsh. Every year, the Empire has to pay the Three Northern Territories reparations for being in charge of defending the borders with gold coins.”

“That would be a question of honour, huh.”

Shinobu gave an understanding look, and nodded in agreement. It seemed that this girl might be surprisingly worldly.

“When it seemed that they had begun to open up after much trouble during the conference meal, the main meat dish was brought out at the previous Emperor’s command.”

“Main course?”

“Yes, it was a whole roasted calf.”

According to the ancient Northern traditions, the leader would carve the cow and serve it to his people.

It was an important ritual for the prideful Northern warriors, as it clarified who was the leader of the many tribes in the North.

“Did the previous Emperor arrange it to display it to the North?”

“I thought so as well. Even the Northern delegates probably thought so. However, an accident happened.”

“Accident?”

“The calf was too heavy, and that the bearer dropped it midway.”

“What a waste...”

“Everyone felt sorry about the calf too. Even the delegates from the North, who were supposed to be hostile, leaked out a sigh. But...”

“But?”

“Another calf was brought out at the previous Emperor’s command.”

Everyone who was at the conference meal was surprised by it.

The calf from before was splendid, but this other calf was even more splendid.

If you thought about it later, it was probably a planned strategy from the very beginning, but no one was able to say anything at that time, while they were looking at that magnificent beast.

“When the previous Emperor carved the calf, the delegates from the North became meek. They were probably awed by the bottomless assets of the Empire they despised so much.”

Gernot had thought that Shinobu and Taisho would be surprised by the story, but their reactions were dull. When he looked at them properly, both of them were looking at Eva for some reason.

“Don’t you think it’s amazing? With the previous Emperor, His Majesty’s wits, the crisis regarding the withdrawal of the Three Northern Territories was avoided.”

“E-eh, it’s amazing, I think.”

For some reason, they were focusing their attention on Eva, who was looking at the handkerchief in Gernot’s hands with a stiff smile.

“Is there something wrong with this handkerchief? It seems to be made from very good silk, but...”

At that moment, Gernot’s expression froze.

The silk-woven handkerchief was pure white except for its four corners, where a crest was embroidered onto it.

“Now then, a three-headed dragon and a hawk’s talon crest...”

Only a single person among all the royalty and nobility in the whole continent was permitted to use this crest. That person, who was from the House of the Prideful Hawk, entered his son-in-law’s family, the Imperial House of the Three Headed Dragon.

“Th...this is the previous emperor’s crest...”

He had wiped his mouth with a handkerchief that contained the previous Emperor’s crest.

It was a rare experience that couldn’t be experienced by other people, but Gernot, who had a renewed sense of admiration towards the Imperial Family after this case, almost fainted after finding out.

“E-Eva-dono. I’ll wash this handkerchief and return it! I’ll surely return it!”

“Do, *dono*? Ah, yes, please return it if you can...”

Gernot unconsciously handed over the payment from his wallet, and rushed out of Izakaya, leaving it behind. Gernot believed that Nobu might have connections, since the lifting of the ban on lager had happened at a strange time.

“Wh-what a frightening store.”

‘I’ll never demand an unreasonable tax from this store.’

Gernot swore it on his life.

Chapter 37

An End With Salmon Ochazuke (Epilogue)

The tables and the counter were wiped beautifully clean with a piece of cloth dampened with vinegar.

Even though Nobuyuki normally left this type of work to Shinobu or Eva, it was his habit to clean it at least once a week.

Today was the Sabbath for the Old Capital.

Although it was morning, nobody was on the streets.

According to the religion that was widely practiced in the Old Capital, people believed that it was a good day to not work. Even though Nobuyuki could open the store, no customers would come.

It was an experience for family members to cherish this day, as it was the only time they could spend together in the entire week.

As a matter of fact, ever since the store had opened that day, Deacon Edwin had been the only customer, so there was hardly any business.

Lastly, Nobuyuki purified the altar and replaced the water of the *sakaki* plant. Ever since the day Eva had disappeared, he had started to offer inari sushi at the altar once a week. Although he did not understand the meaning behind it, he had a feeling that business had begun to flourish, so it was a small price to pay.

(TL: Sakaki: evergreen tree. Cleyera japonica)

Speaking of “Inari”, the store itself is a mystery.

The entrance of this store, which was located in the corner of a shopping district that had a bad reputation, was somehow connected to the Old Capital. It was possible to enter the store from the shopping district side by opening the front shutters, but when they wanted to exit the store, it would be connected to the Old Capital.

(TL: Inari in this context means God of Harvest, Uka-no-Mitama)

Due to Nobuyuki and Shinobu’s easygoing nature, they did not mind the small details, and the landlord had kept silent too. The monthly rent was paid through bank transactions, since the landlord, who lived in the nearby Inari shrine, never came to visit the store.

Even though Nobuyuki visited the Inari shrine occasionally, it wasn't merely for a stroll.

When he had been in deep trouble, it was this Inari shrine that had helped him.

"Now then, is it about time to get ready?"

He was done with his routine cleaning on the Sabbath.

After this, he would normally go to his own room on the second floor and watch his pre-recorded detective dramas, assemble a plastic model of a ship in a bottle, or eat out on the pretence of research.

However, today was different. There would be a special customer arriving.

He changed out of his work clothes that he had worn during his cleaning and donned his chef clothes.

It was one of the special skills Nobuyuki had obtained during his pursuit of knowledge; he could feel calm and clear his mind whenever he put on his white chef's hat.

He had just finished sterilizing his kitchen knife and other preparations when he heard a noise coming from the back door

"...elcome."

"Hello..."

Shinobu entered shyly.

She was wearing a refreshing sundress with a thin jacket, which gave off an entirely different impression from her usual apron work attire.

She entered the store, passing behind Nobuyuki, and sat down at the counter. She had settled down, but her behaviour was different from usual.

"Taisho, I'm sorry for asking for such a big favour today"

"It's alright. Since it's an anniversary."

Today, exactly half a year had passed since Izakaya Nobu opened in the Old Capital.

It had been cold and snowy, with flickers of sunlight, when the store had opened on that day in the Old Capital, but right now, it was hot enough for one to actually break a sweat.

Two glasses, not mugs, were filled with beer.

When Nobuyuki handed the glass, which looked like it was covered in sweat, to Shinobu, he was surprised to see that her fingers were longer and thinner than he had expected.

“Cheers.”

“... Cheers.”

Even though Nobuyuki had only intended to take a sip, it seemed that he was thirsty. He made a bitter smile after he had had unintentionally drained his glass. Although Shinobu had practically no makeup on when she ate, her skin looked vibrant. No, did she just lack an interest in makeup?

“Speaking of beer, a lot has happened, hasn’t it?”

“Indeed. That Bachschouf case.”

“Yes, yes, Bachschouf, if I remember correctly.”

Nobuyuki served the appetizer that he had prepared to Shinobu, who was holding the glass in one hand and laughing mirthfully.

It was possible to serve sashimi, which was not a familiar dish to the people of the Old Capital yet, without reserve today.

He watched as Shinobu savoured the food quietly.

Shinobu, who had been strictly disciplined as a daughter of a ryotei, had a beautiful way of eating.

Furthermore, her tongue was the real deal.

(ED: In this case, i think it refers to Shinobu’s refined sense of taste)

“Taisho, did your skills improve again?”

“Did it? If Shinobu-chan says so, then it must be so.”

“I think it’s tailored more towards the customer’s tastes now, compared to before.”

“The customer’s tastes, huh?”

It had been about nine months since Shinobu ran away from home and fled from the ryotei with him.

It wasn’t something romantic like eloping, though.

It was more like two people had escaped separately, but acted on it at the same time by chance.

It seemed that the reason Shinobu ran away from her family was because she had to marry against her will.

It was just for formalities, but there were plans to arrange a marriage interview with the son of the vice president of a bank in order to rebuild the ryotei, which was in a bad financial situation.

Based on her personality, he could understand why Shinobu left that detestable house.

“Taisho, I...want to eat tempura.”

“Okay okay. I’ll fry whatever you want.”

Since the last resort of having Shinobu marry to rebuild the ryotei was called off, it was necessary to begin restructuring its employees, after looking at the current situation.

Even though Nobuyuki took pride in his cooking skills, socializing was not one of his strong points. If he was going to be fired, he thought that he might as well leave the store immediately. Then he had unexpectedly met Shinobu-ojousama again.

Shinobu sprinkled some salt over the crisply fried tempura and mixed it evenly. Shinobu’s favourites were whiting, maitake mushrooms, edible chrysanthemum, and squid. She was also a fan of unusual things like benishoga tempura.

(TL: benishoga: red pickled ginger)

“This squid is delicious.”

“If it’s this delicious squid, Berthold-san might even be able to eat it, right?”

“I don’t think he has overcome his fear enough yet.”

He served a second glass of beer when Shinobu picked up the extra crispy fried squid.

In his opinion, it was well-fried.

Her face seemed a little flushed. Had she become tipsy?

From that point on, he made various appetizers as per Shinobu’s requests.

He served items that were difficult to serve out in the Old Capital. By adding a little twist, he even served dishes that could be made in the Old Capital. He even redesigned some of the Old Capital’s dishes.

Every time a piece was served, Shinobu’s merciless criticism came flying out, and she excitedly talked about the regulars she wanted to serve it to.

It wasn’t bad to have rest days like this.

Finally, the last dish was salmon ochazuke for two people.

Although they weren’t aware of it, this was the dish that the previous Emperor had eaten.

They ate it as if they were drinking it. It smoothly filled up the stomach and gave a pleasant, satisfying feeling.

“Hey, Nobuyuki-san”

“Hm?”

“Let’s continue it, this Izakaya Nobu.”

“Ah...that’s right.”

Somewhere close by, they heard the faint sounds of cicadas chirping.

Midsummer was almost upon them.



